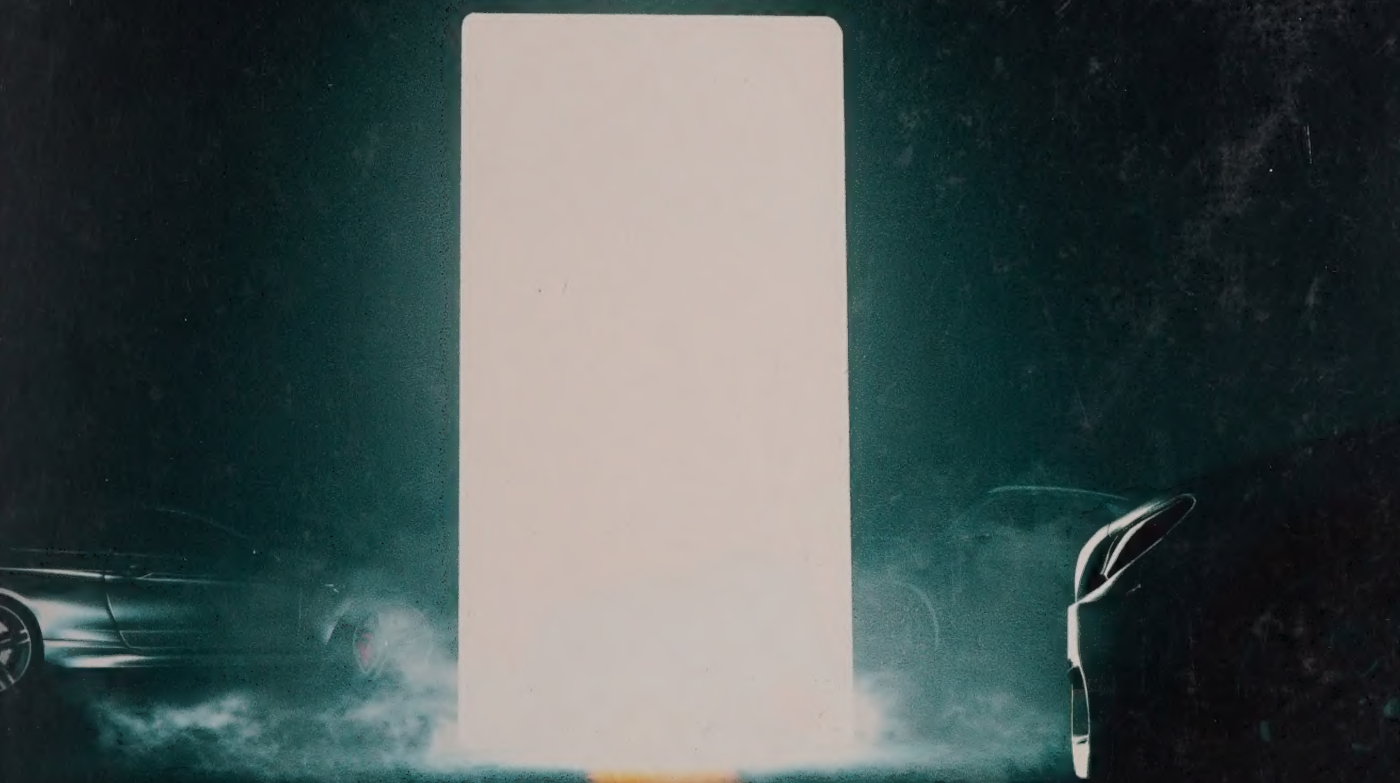
MIASMA

ROB KINSEY



ELIAS RAVANETTI

CASSANDRA FILICE

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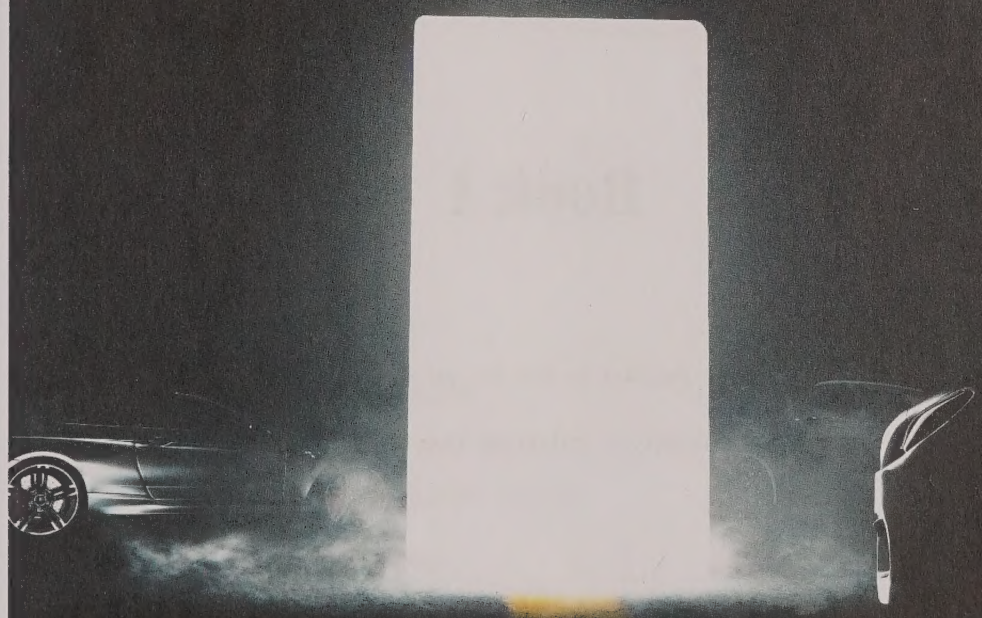

ROB KINSEY

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Book 1

Miasma - (my-as-ma)

1. Infectious particles or germs floating in the air; air made noxious by the presence of such particles or germs.
2. A harmful or corrupting atmosphere or influence; also, an atmosphere that obscures, a fog.

Chapters:

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Prologue – The First Doorway

Banff, Alberta, Canada
April 11th, 1888
Banff Springs Hotel Construction Site

The sound of hammers driving nails into freshly cut pine echoed through the snow filled valley below. Men struggled with huge columns of wood supported by chains that groaned from the weight. Clydesdales snorted as they towed felled trees over mud packed trails toward the screaming saws of the temporary mill erected at the base of the construction site. The smell of sap and manure hung in the air.

Tommy McCauley darted through the scene at a frantic pace. He ducked beneath half built walls, dodged wheelbarrows, and sped past stacks of Italian marble and piles of imported British Columbia old growth pine. Friends and coworkers saw his hurried pace, and joked as he rushed by.

"Where's the fire? It ain't quitin' time yet, Tommy!" yelled one.

"Are you feeling okay, McCauley?" asked another.

"You'll be putting the rest of us out of a job at that pace, Tommy!"

The look of pure terror on Tommy's face quickly shut their mouths and wiped away their smiles.

The glaciers of the towering mountains that surrounded the jobsite fed the turquoise lakes and rivers of the valley. Tommy didn't see any of it. He was on his way to the big boss. He was off to fetch Bruce Price. *The* Bruce Price. If you wanted anything done on the site, five hundred miles away from any human settlement of consequence, than Bruce Price was the man to see. He was Canadian National Railway's lead architect. The man who paid the bills, made the decisions, and who had sent more than one unlucky carpenter on the long train ride back East. Tommy was the unlucky one who found *it*—of all the cursed luck—and it was why they picked him. He thought back to the words of

the foreman, Jim Farmer. "You're voted in, and that's that. You run and get Mr. Price right now, Tommy. Direct there and back without stopping to so much as blink, boy."

Tommy couldn't stop his hands from shaking as he approached the large jobsite office. All he could think of was his wife Mary and their baby back in New Berlin. How was he going to explain this to them if he lost his job? He was supposed to return home with enough money to start a life for them. They were depending on him. It was this sense of responsibility that kept him from playing the dice and card games with the other men, or diving into the whisky bottle at the end of the day. Tommy thought the door to the offices looked like a well crafted guillotine, but he entered without pause, and walked directly toward Bruce Price's office.

An older man with a large grey mustache looked up at him from over thick glasses. Bruce Price did not like to be disturbed, for any reason, but after taking in the look on Tommy's face he could see something was terribly wrong.

"Oh, Jesus Mary. I don't like that expression. What's happened?" asked Price, his words thick with a New York accent.

The boy, terrified and breathless, looked like he wanted to speak but no words would come from his mouth.

"Come on, boy, spit it out! You look like you've seen a ghost!" commanded Price, his initial surprised reaction already turning to anger.

"Sir… Mr.…please come with me…I…well, we've…well…*found something*," stuttered Tommy, his voice cracking.

"Oh, Jesus, if that drunken O'Grady has fallen from a third story window again I'll kill him myself. He's lucky his father's company owns two of the diggers, or—"

Tommy interrupted. "No, sir. No one's been hurt. I…I can't explain. You have to see it for yourself."

Under almost any other circumstance Price would have made the employee in his office fully

explain himself, but something stopped him. He did not know if it was the expression on the boy's white face or just curiosity as to what could scare someone as badly as this boy was scared. Price got up from his seat, grabbed his pipe and a pinch of tobacco, threw on his jacket, and made his way outside the door with Tommy leading.

The hotel itself was to be one of a kind with no expense spared. It was described as a diamond in the heart of the breathtaking Rocky Mountains of Canada's West. The facility was designed to draw the vacationers, the curious, the pioneers, and the rich to the far end of this empty, yet beautiful, country. To get here, people would have to take the train. CN knew if the railroad was to be profitable, people needed a reason to ride on it. This hotel was going to be the reason.

Bruce Price was not here for money, although in the end he would receive his fair share. This hotel was going to be the feather in his cap, the legacy of a long and distinguished career. He had built bridges and hotels in Montreal, rebuilt the state Capitol in Illinois, built train stations in New York, Ohio, and Ontario. None of those projects, even combined, would come close to what he was building here. As he powered up the unfinished stairway, he decided that whatever it was that this young boy was leading him to he would deal with, decisively.

A crowd had already gathered near the unboarded walls of the seventh story suite. The room was cold and the wind blowing through the framing brought a chill to Price's flesh. He knew the layout of the room: a large window facing north toward the trees on the mountain, a full bath, and two bedrooms. Blueprint number 2D North, room 733. Not the Royal suite, and perhaps a bit cold being on the north side and so close to the stairwell, but all in all, a quality room.

"Mr. Price! Sir, we've somethin' fer ya to see," said Jim Farmer, pushing his way forward.

"It better be bloody well important to have this many of my men standing around, Jim," said Price, loud enough to cause the men nearby to turn their heads away and look to the floor. He felt his voice lacked some of the intensity that it usually carried when addressing the men. The look on the young lad's face really had thrown him off.

"Yes, yes, a' course, Mr. Price," said Jim. He led Price through the throng of workers who backed away from their boss, as if afraid to crowd him.

Price looked into the room and did not see what he expected. There was no employee who had hanged himself after receiving word, carried on the mail train and already a month old, that his wife or girl back home had left him. There was no seriously injured worker, the result of a trade disagreement that had ended up with a hammer embedded in someone's skull. He had seen this all before, and more—an unfortunate and dirty part of the construction business. Blood was as much a part of the buildings and bridges that he built as the wood, steel, and brick.

What Price saw that cool April morning was what looked like a large rectangular silver mirror, frameless, and floating completely unsuspended in the middle of the room. It had an almost liquid feel to it, like spilt mercury from a thermometer floating in the air. He was immediately impressed by the precision of the prank…it *had* to be a prank or a magic trick, because what he saw before him simply could not be. Price was so profoundly impressed, in fact, that he felt almost proud to have craftsmen on his staff with the degree of skill it would require to create such an optical illusion.

"Jim, what am I looking at besides a clever and difficult trick?"

"No, sir, this ain't no prank. And there's more, Mr. Price," said Jim as he picked up two nearby wrenches and headed farther into the room. As he walked behind the floating mirror he seemed to go almost hazy.

"Firstly, I want you to listen to the sounds from inside of it," said Jim. "It was already difficult to hear anything, especially before word got 'round about this and everyone came in here. Everybody, quiet now, quiet! If I hear more than a heartbeat out of you men I'll dock a day's labour!"

An abrupt hush came over the men and all that could be heard was the wind as it blew over the trees of the nearby mountains. Suddenly there came a noise—a slight screeching, or perhaps a high pitched laughing. Voices could also be discerned coming from inside the mirror.

Bruce Price was now as intrigued as the rest of them. He was also terrified. He could feel the

skin on his back creeping and his hands twitched. It was unlike anything on God's good earth that he had seen or felt before. He shook it off though, as it was one thing to be afraid but quite another to show fear in front of your men. He had not done so in thirty-six and a half years of construction and he was not going to start now. Many of the nearby men who heard the sounds backed up and stared wide eyed at each other. The occasional prayer could be heard through the crowd.

"And there's still more, Mr. Price. You see, there's absolutely nothing holding it up." Jim swung his arm above and below the floating mirror, and as he did, he seemed to angle sickeningly toward it.

Bruce investigated this for himself and surveyed the air above and below. He could see that Jim was right. When he was very close he noticed a nearly transparent mist was lightly billowing out of it, almost like the wavy air around a red hot element.

"Now watch this," said Jim, and he stepped forward and tossed a wrench right into the glass. Bruce braced for a crash, but to his utter astonishment the wrench disappeared right into it. There was no sound of glass breaking or of the wrench hitting the floor on the opposite side. The only sound that came were the gasps of the men who watched the tool disappear before their eyes.

Price was unable to keep his mouth shut as he walked around the "mirror" (at a good distance) to see for himself that no wrench had landed on the floor behind.

"And look here what happens if I throw one from the other side," said Jim. He tossed the other wrench at the back side. It sunk halfway into the reflection, spun around, and fell to the floor sliced perfectly in two. Jim placed the half wrench in Price's hands and said quietly so that the rest of the men couldn't hear, "I think it's some kind of doorway, sir."

"Jesus Christ in Heaven," muttered Price, who removed his spectacles and wiped them. He now understood the look of fear on the young lad's face who had come to fetch him. The emotion seemed perfectly justified.

"Who will volunteer to enter?" asked Price suddenly. He was expected to lead in this situation,

and by God, he would. His voice was shrill but authoritative, and it silenced the mesmerized men who surrounded the strange scene. A still moment went by with no one making a sound and all eyes set to the floor.

"None of you is brave enough, huh?" asked Price. "Well, then, a full week's pay over and above for whoever's willing."

There was still no response. He really could not blame them.

"How about a week back at the Bow River Hotel in Fort Calgary, all expenses paid?" he queried, trying to sweeten the deal.

"C'mon, lads! There has got to be one of ya willin' to go!" implored Jim, who took from his boss's lead.

There was some movement among the men on this one. A murmur here and there, but still no man took the challenge.

"You can't spend money if yer dead," came a voice from one of the men in the background.

Price found himself at an impasse. He might try offering these men ten thousand dollars, and still they would likely not take it, and even if someone did, he would have a difficult time explaining the expense to the accountants back in Ottawa. But someone had to go. Someone had to find out what this was, and its novelty and mystery were slowing down the progress on his hotel. He long ago learned that every hour counted, and in construction, time truly was money.

"Very well, then, gentlemen," said Price as he rolled up his sleeves. "As my father used to say: if you lead…lead by example."

He made the men grab a rope and tie it around him, ignoring Jim Farmer who was voicing his displeasure with the idea. He felt the respect and admiration emanating from his men. It was that admiration, and the embarrassment of not going through with it, that gave him the courage to push himself across the threshold.

The men gasped as Price's body disappeared right into the mirror. The rope split in two only

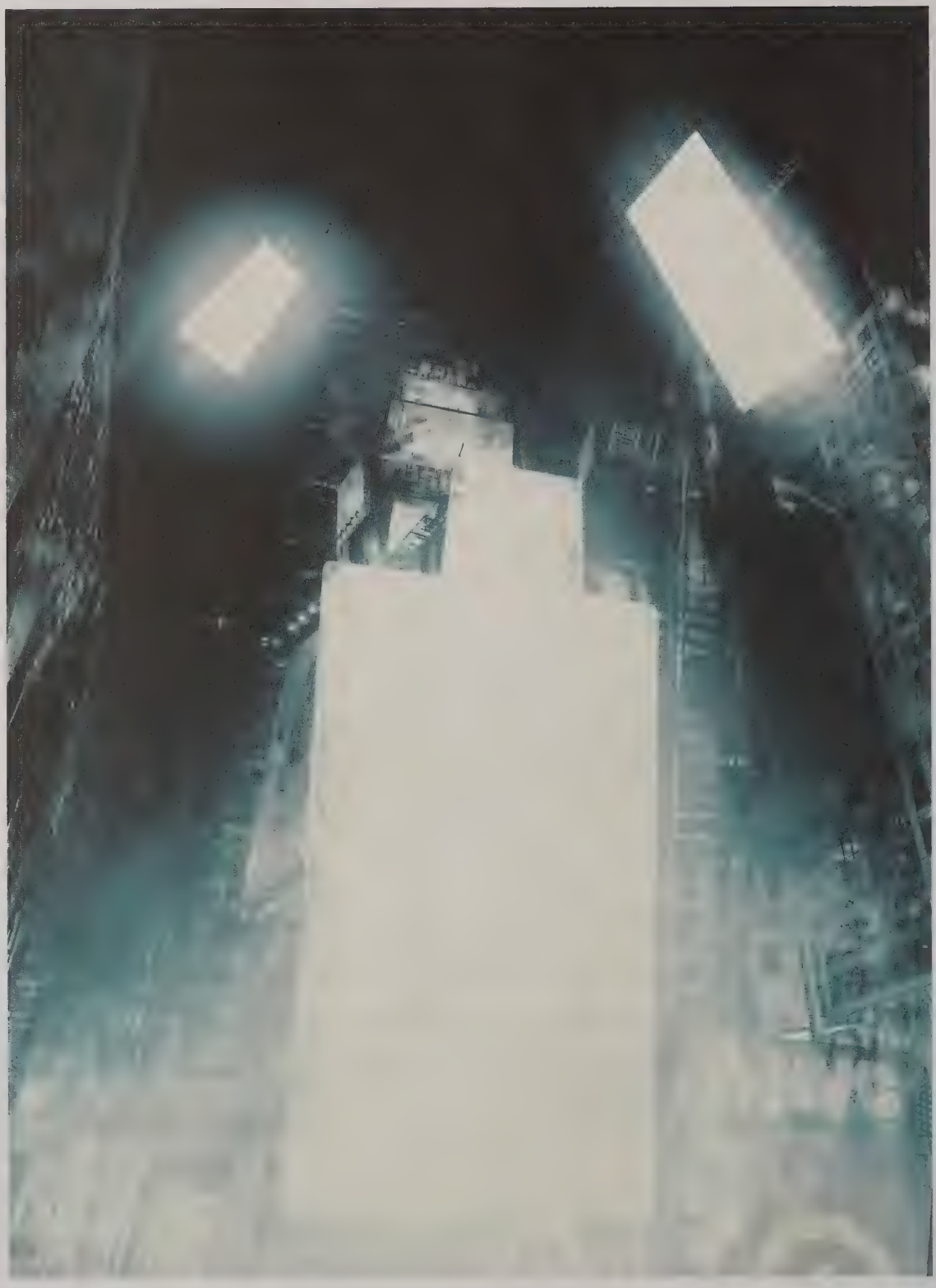
moments after he entered and lay inert on the unfinished floor. There was a stunned silence as the men waited, staring at the mist that now poured from the doorway. It was only minutes later when Price fell from the portal, looking haggard and struggling to get to his feet. In his hands were the wrench and some other tools thrown in before his arrival. The men rushed to him and helped him up. His expression was of pure, unabashed horror, laced with the smallest tinge of relief.

After a few moments spent catching his breath and getting a grip on himself, he spoke. "Room 733," he paused to clear his throat, then continued more strongly, "will be blocked off with two full layers of board and a layer of gypsum on each side. The door and the window are to be removed and completely covered over. Room 734 will be adjusted along with room 735 into three smaller rooms. The third room created will become room 733. I will forward adjusted dimensions to Jim before the end of the day. When this is completed I will personally review your work, and pound in the final nail that will seal off that…doorway…forever. No one! And I mean no one, will speak of this room, or of what they've seen here today, ever again. This…gateway…will be covered up and forgotten for the life of this hotel. I will remove any evidence of it from the drawings and deny any man who claims this room's existence. I will not have ghost stories keeping people away from the work we have completed here. If I find out one of you has so much as *thought* about what you have seen here today, I will have your job, I will have your bonus, and I will make sure you never work on any other jobsite, so long as I live. So help me God."

With his speech completed, Price made his way out of the hotel and through the snow back to his office where he opened and emptied the bottle of forty year old scotch he had been saving for the coronation ceremony. He would never speak of Chinese workers killed on a structural collapse and buried below the foundation; he would not speak of the large sums of money he received under the table for hiring the Pacific Gypsum Company; and he most surely would never again speak of what was hidden in room 733.

The empires of the future are the empires of the mind.

- Sir Winston Churchill



Chapter 0 – Something in the Air

Ryan Jeffries was thinking again about all the rotten shit in his life as he pumped yet another car full of gas. The lineup of vehicles stretched even farther than they had last spring, when the gas war was in full swing with Supra-Gas across the street. Ryan's recent bad luck was one of those stretches in time when life had you down. When the stars were a little bit out of alignment. He was riding the low point of the wave and there was nothing he could do. Even if he decided to work a little harder, maybe drink a little less, and motivate himself a little more, he knew that things wouldn't improve. Whoever was running the show upstairs had a serious hard-on when it came to making his life miserable, and who was Ryan to stand up to forces like that? The best thing he could do was take his lickings and try to lay low, and hope that the big guy would get bored and decide to move on to someone else.

It all fell apart the night of his high school graduation. He looked back at those days like an old man daydreaming of youth, yet it was barely over a year past. He'd had it all. Lots of good friends, a gorgeous girlfriend, first line on the hockey team, a respected receiver on the football team, a fast car, a little money, a part time job, and some pretty good grades.

"The future was so bright I should have worn shades," Ryan muttered to himself as the digits on the gas pump ticked away.

It was astounding what one little impaired driving charge could do to a person's life.

But Ryan was not one to complain. His knew his time would come.

* * *

* * *

Wesley David sat alone on the sixth floor of the university's massive central library. It was his safe place, a tucked away Fortress of Solitude in a hidden corner of campus where he could read his comic books, surf on his phone and write in his journal, in peace. Wes's description of peace had changed since he'd come here. The bullies weren't the same now that he was in university. *Actually,* thought Wes, *they aren't bullies when they reach university, they're assholes.* Regardless, university was a fresh start. He wasn't exactly 'cool', or the center of the girls' attention, but things were starting to change for Wes. He was a little too skinny, and not the smartest dresser, but he had been going to the gym every day since the start of school, and he was starting to pay a little more attention to what he put on in the morning, and he was starting to see a difference. Wes noticed that a few girls were starting to look his way, and he was no longer feeling awkward at the bar or at the parties he was starting to get invited to. Wesley David was loosening up, and finding himself. The assholes were moving onto easier prey. His father once told him that college was the best time of a person's life, and Wes was beginning to think maybe his dear old dad might be right.

Even tucked away near the corner windows in a cubby desk, he could hear the sounds of people talking and whispering as he struggled to memorize the ridiculous names of assorted medicinal plants. It was the loudest morning he could remember in the library, which was usually very quiet during study times. *It's finals! Can't people these people learn to shut up? It's a damn library,* thought Wes as he leaned his head out of his cubby and looked at two girls farther down the row who were among the worst offenders.

"Excuse me…hey, excuse me," said Wes. "I'm trying to study."

"Haven't you heard?" asked one girl, who didn't take any offense to the connotation in Wes's voice.

"Heard what?"

The girl pointed her finger at the window. Wes was accustomed to this spot, as the view and the privacy were his primary reasons for making it his study place. The desk looked over Edmonton's River Valley and if you turned in the right direction you could see the glass covered office towers of downtown. There was also a nice view of the sprawling residential areas and the long snowy river valley. But the view was different than what he became familiar with over the last year of study. Thick tendrils of black smoke floated up into the sky from multiple fires burning in the distance.

"Oh, my God!" blurted out Wes. "What's going on?"

"Didn't you watch the news last night?" asked the girl, who Wes might have found attractive if he was not so shocked by the scene outside the window. Wes shook his head and she continued. "Well, I'm not too sure, but whatever is going on in Asia has started in New York and Toronto. Looks like it's coming here too. Soon. If you had a test today, it's cancelled."

A part of Wes appreciated the news. His attendance in Botany 214 had been spotty and he'd only finished reviewing the course material an hour earlier. The test was less than two hours away.

"It must be pretty serious then?" asked Wes.

The girl turned and looked him in the eyes. "Very."

* * *

Thursday at the Granite Nightclub was Liv Myatt's favourite night of the week. It was never as busy as it was on weekend nights but it was always just as much fun. The people that showed up on Thursdays knew how to party. Thursdays were also cheaper and much easier to get a quick Uber. Liv and her friends also found that meeting guys was easier too. There were far fewer weekend bar stars to compete with, and the guys tended to not get as ridiculously drunk, as many of them worked the next morning. Thursday was her night. Liv was at the top of her game, and she knew it from the angry stares of the other girls in the bar. The guys always approached her, that was nothing new, but when

the girls were jealous and watching their boyfriends, she knew that she was on.

But on or not, no one came home with her, not that she couldn't have seized more than one reasonable opportunity. She wasn't perfect, by any stretch, but she wanted more than what the drunken frat boys had to offer.

But this was Friday morning, and there was no denying it from the headache that throbbed at her temples with each heartbeat. She was off work today (*thank the Lord*) and although she felt no guilt about sleeping in—way in—the rest of the world didn't want her to. Outside of her window, siren after siren wailed. There must have been a huge fire burning somewhere because she could smell smoke. But she knew if the fire was in her own building the alarm would be ringing.

Liv—tall, blond, and very beautiful the night before—did not look nearly as attractive this morning as she got up to close the thin slit of her apartment window to block out the sounds from outside. Her hair was a disaster, a long drool line was crusted to the side of her cheek, and the pillow had etched red seams into her face. She slammed the window shut. With her head still pounding and her eyes barely open, Liv crawled back into bed with the sounds from outside dulled. Not completely gone, but quieted enough for her to return to a merciful sleep.

* * *

Paul Dean's mother hated his motorcycle.

"Just because our last name is Dean doesn't make your first name James," she repeatedly barked at him.

Every time he heard her say that it brought a smile to his face. He loved her dearly, even though she often made his life difficult. She held on too tight since the divorce (or more accurately: abandonment) and Paul, old enough to drink, vote, and go to war, had to fight for every inch of

freedom that he could get.

The motorcycle he rode was all that remained of his dad. His father lost possession of it years before after not paying support, and his mother never took the time or made the effort to sell it. With the motorbike came the leather jacket; they went together like a bullet and a gun. And as long as you had a leather jacket, you needed the long hair (not too long, and no pony tail). Paul decided he might as well act like the character that life scripted for him. He quite enjoyed being the lean, dark young man that mothers warned their daughters about.

It was early in the year to be on the bike—the winter snows still held on in the ditches—but as Paul drove through the throng of traffic he was thankful he was on a bike and not in a car. He had never seen anything like it before: the accidents, the traffic, the fires, the honking, the screaming.

The sirens and children wailed together in the gridlock as Paul slalomed home to his mother through the chaos.

* * *

Jen Jarvis was not the only person to seek the church at a time like this. She'd been going less and less since she started dating Deacon. He wasn't religious, and he was the type that didn't trust those who were. Jen tried to pretend it didn't bother her, but if it didn't, why hadn't she gone in over three months?

Reverend Branch stood at the front of the church as she entered. His voice overpowered the sirens from outside but he could not completely drown them out. He was more of a wise and subtle man than the outspoken preachers that she saw on television, and he helped her through some of the difficult times in her childhood, and the self-confidence problems that arose with adolescence. He gave a nod of greeting to her as he spoke.

"…they say this may be the end. Judgment Day. I cannot say it is so, for I truly do not know.

We have seen signs and images this may be the case, but there are also many missing…among the oldest sayings in these walls is that the Lord works in mysterious ways. We have said it at the funerals of those who have left us too soon, at the tragedies and horrors that unfortunately have touched so many people's lives. Today is another time when we must accept the meaning of these words. We must have faith. Faith in His plan. Faith in His reasons, and faith in each other. I would like to bring up a Psalm…"

Reverend Branch was suddenly interrupted by the boom of fighter jets roaring above the church. There were moans and screams from the parishioners startled by the sound and Jen Jarvis was one of them. The images from the news of the creatures and portals were, by far, the most horrifying thing she had ever seen in her young life and they immediately reminded her that she had lost touch with God. She had come here out of faith, but also out of pure, unabashed fear.

"Everyone, please, I think it may be best if you went home to your families, to be with them, and to protect them. For those of you who would prefer to stay, the church will remain open throughout this crisis…so long as it can. Go in peace. Amen."

Jen stood up and was getting ready to return home when she again made eye contact with the Reverend. She couldn't be sure, but thought that she saw terror in his eyes too.

* * *

Deacon Jacobs was trying out for the University of Alberta rugby team when he first heard the news. He was being crushed at the bottom of a scrum of players, with his hand bent so far back that his fingers were almost touching his forearm when the coach mercifully blasted the horn. Pain seared through his arm as the bodies slowly climbed off of him and he couldn't help but scream at the fat players on top of him to hurry up and get off.

His football coach thought rugby would be the ideal prelude to get him in shape for when the

real sport, and the *real* season began. *It'll keep some of that muscle on that frame and keep ya from goin' soft on me this fall,* he'd said. Deacon wondered how soft his throwing arm was going to be when all the bones in it were shattered into tiny pieces.

It took Deacon some time before he began to listen to what all the commotion was about as he checked his wrist and arm to see what snapped, crackled, or popped. Nothing did. Deacon Jacobs was born both lucky and strong.

"…I don't know what it is that's goin' on, lads," said the coach in his thick Yorkshire accent, "but it's pretty serious. They don't shut down the university buildings in the middle of the day for nothin'. You'd all best get inside and change quickly before they lock in your bags."

"A terrorist attack, Coach?" asked one of the galoots that had been crushing Deacon's hand.

"No, lad, I don't think so…I don't think so…but from what campus security just told me, we might not be havin' practice for a long, long time."

* * *

The mound of bacon sizzled as Scott Armstrong remembered how his parents would talk about where they were on the day that something really important happened in history. His mother would go on and on about how she was grocery shopping the day Elvis died. His father would occasionally reminisce of how he was in school the day John F. Kennedy was shot.

Scott saw his own share of memorable events in his young life. The first Black President elected, Michael Jackson dying, terror attacks and shooting after shooting after shooting. On September 11, 2001, even at the tender age of five he knew he was a part of something important in history. Something terrible.

But that awful day in September looked like it was going to be only a forgotten footnote

compared to this. Four planes, three buildings, and it was all over. This was different. This affected everyone. This wasn't on TV, or in a country, or a city, or even a neighborhood far away. This was real. This was huge. This was now. And the scariest part was that it was *here*.

"Do you think we should lock up and go home, Scotty?" asked Samantha. "I'm getting kind of scared… and the place is nearly dead."

She was among the best of the waitresses at Marty's Grill, a good sized greasy spoon on the outskirts of Edmonton, Alberta. It was a little more hip than the average diner, mostly because of all the old junk on the walls. Enough distraction to keep the customers from bitching too much while they waited for their steaks to be cooked a little less than how they asked. Like Marty always said, *You can't un-cook a steak, Scotty-boy.*

"I think I should talk to Marty before *I* go home," answered Scott after thinking it over for a moment. He hitched his pants up over his gut and resettled his stained apron. "I don't think we should abandon the joint yet. I'm sure he'll show up soon, this being his place and all… Jesus, what's going on out there?"

They gathered with the rest of the staff in the lounge, the bacon forgotten and sizzling back in the kitchen, and watched the images on the television. The customers stood with them, drawn by the horrific sounds coming from the TV. Scott swallowed hard at the sound of the news anchor's voice, shaking and unsteady, as it echoed through the restaurant:

...the actual casualties so far in Asia are beyond calculation...okay...We have a report now that another of the rifts has opened above a small town outside of Bengaluru, India... I'm told...that's...I apologize, we have another report....No, no, the feed has cut out on that one so we're going to return to the footage of the anomaly above Rock Hampton, Australia....As you can see, the strange... substance... continues to billow out of the opening along with what appears to be the creatures that have been reported in Japan, China, and Korea. As you can see, they seem to be falling a great distance to their deaths....We have another report from Eastern Russia, where...

It began late last night in Hawaii and Scott watched the increasing news coverage until he could no longer keep his eyes open. When he awoke, shortly after noon, he went to the television before he even stopped for a bathroom break. The coverage and seriousness of the event were growing. It seemed to be following the onset of nightfall in each time zone. If the trend continued, they were only four hours from it happening right here.

"I'm sorry, Scott, but no job's worth this. I've got to go home to my mom, I'm sure she's losing her mind worrying about me," said Samantha. "Let Marty know I'm sorry. He's a family man, I think he'll understand."

"He'll understand. Get outta here. I can cover for ya, besides, there's barely anyone here anyway. We'll see ya tomorrow," said Scott, but something inside of him thought he might be lying.

"Yeah, I sure hope so. I sure hope there *is* a tomorrow," said Samantha as she cashed out her final table of the day.

A year and a half later…

Chapter 1 – Satellites

Wesley David –Entry # 1

Sometimes I feel like it's all a really bad dream.

I think back to how complicated life used to be. Every day was abuzz with activity. Phone calls, reports, tests, and responsibility. There were so many things to worry about. I can remember being furious the store was out of my favourite beer, or being totally frustrated when a fast food drive-through would take too long. All that makes me laugh now. Although none of my companions would agree, maybe life is better now because it's so much simpler. All we have to do is survive.

April the 11th changed everything. Life was getting too complicated. The only part that bothers me is I didn't realize it. It's funny how that happens. Like when someone close to you gets terminal cancer, or dies suddenly in a car crash. Business problems, car repair bills, fighting over money with friends or family—it all goes out the window when someone you love dies. That one moment when you get that call on the phone and hear the news. Those few seconds between understanding and acceptance, when you become free. Free of all those countless, shitty little problems. They all disappear in the face of the one gigantic disaster. I think that's what the group of us feels now.

It's sometime in August, probably late, under a year and a half since what has come to be known, at least around here, as "The Arrival". There are seven of us in our camp outside of Hinton, Alberta. It was once a small coal and lumber city on the shore of the Canadian Rockies. It amazes that they used to mine coal out of the foothills here and ship it hundreds of kilometres over the mountains

and thousands of kilometres across the sea, to Japan. Over there, they would make some car or iphone and ship it across the sea and over the mountains, right back to this tiny little town. Things used to be so organized. Now, it's nothing but chaos and the struggle to carry on, physically, mentally and emotionally.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a positive person and I still try to have a good outlook. It's just that so much has happened to us in the last year and a half that it's hard to stay positive. I've lost my parents and I think I've lost my brother. Everyone here has lost somebody. We used to have pizza for dinner. Tonight we're eating rabbit and some of the canned beets we found in a farmhouse yesterday. The sad thing is this is one of the best meals we've had in weeks. I found this notebook at that house. I've been talking for a while about finding a journal to write in again. I buried my last one. I'm not a great writer, but I took some English in university so it should be readable.

Welcome to Wesley's fantastic journal, whoever you are. How did you ever come across it?

* * *

It was a warm August night in the hills east of the Canadian Rockies where a small campfire was being tended. Wesley David finished writing in the notebook he'd found a day earlier. Five of his other companions were asleep together in the group's two tents. Only Paul Dean was awake, staring at the stars through one eye of his binoculars.

"It's crazy there are still satellites up there," said Paul. "I see them every night. You'd think they would have fallen out of the sky with nobody on the ground looking after them."

"I don't understand your fascination with those things. There's other stuff in the sky to look at, you know," said Wes. "But they cost millions. Years of engineering and planning put into them. I think they'll be okay up there on their own, at least for a while."

"Maybe," said Paul with a sigh. "Are you going to bed or what?"

"Yeah, I'm beat."

After handing Paul the rifle and bullets, Wes crawled into his tent. Of the two tents, Wes' was by far the best. It was one of those silver space domes people with too much money would buy to go camping once every two years. Paul always complained it was too visible and reflective but nothing ever came of it. Without it they would have no room to sleep, and nothing to keep the frost off their backs. The nights would be getting colder and longer soon, unless they moved south. Winter was coming and there was no way they would survive it searching through summer cabins and farmhouses for food. There was no choice but to keep moving. Staying in one place cost their friend Ryan his life, and none of them were about to repeat that mistake.

Paul spent his share of the night watch thinking of the mistakes they had made, and wondering what new mistakes they would make in the future. He watched the stars for a time, and then watched a familiar mist roll in around him from the surrounding trees. Around three in the morning he went to wake up Anna. It troubled Paul to give her the rifle. Ever since her parents were killed she had been messed up, even in comparison to the rest of them. Who could expect her not to be? But she could be so depressed and morbid that Paul worried she would turn the rifle on herself. The last thing the group needed was another blow to their morale. Yesterday's farmhouse discovery had been good for them and turned out to be a treasure chest.

They found a shotgun and shells, a hunting bow with arrows, steak knives and cutlery, canned foods, blankets, and some new clothes that fit the girls. Wes even found himself a new notebook and sturdy ballpoint pen. He had wanted to find something to write his thoughts onto again for months, and was ecstatic with the find. Most of the group agreed the best thing they found was the all terrain vehicle in the shed. It was a little old, but it fired up easily enough, with the keys they located in a desk drawer. They also found an almost full, though small, jerry can of gas in the shed. Gasoline was an even more cherished commodity in these times, and Paul disliked the idea of wasting it on the ATV. He wanted to save it for an actual vehicle but the will of the group was stronger than his arguments.

He may have been the leader by his own proclamation, but often Deacon refused to be led, especially when the group was behind him on a decision.

The high spirits didn't last long. The ATV proved to be less of a bonus than they'd hoped. Half the travel time was spent moving downed logs and avoiding hills and marshes and in the end the machine actually impeded more than it helped. Paul took every opportunity to complain, but secretly had been happy to have some of the load, of which he often carried the most, off his back.

The group had no real destination. Ever since the loss of Ryan they travelled like nomads through the rural areas of Northwestern Alberta, never staying in one place for more than a couple of days. In that time they found they could survive on the land and the food left in abandoned homes and cabins. They had not come into direct contact with anything for almost three weeks and most of the group felt they were due.

They were.

* * *

Anna hated her time at watch. It was cold, it was lonely, and worst of all her mind had no distractions. She knew Paul hated giving her the rifle. She wondered if it was because she couldn't shoot worth a damn, or if he was worried she would use it on herself. Suicide. She decided long ago against it. What good would it do? Besides, the actual act of killing oneself was much harder than it seemed. She seriously considered it once. She'd lost her job, her boyfriend, and her parents all in the same year. Her job, a part time travel agent while in nursing school, disappeared during the first weeks of the crisis, and then her boyfriend was killed by a Skull only a few months later. That hurt, but losing her parents and home was the worst. Memories of her mother's body being ripped apart flooded into her head, as much as she tried to fight them. Tears came again, as they always seemed to when she was alone.

"Stop it, Anna, just let it go," she scolded herself as she quietly sobbed. "There's nothing you could have done. You knew needles and charts back then, not fighting…everyone here has lost someone and they're not losing control all the time. You've got to smarten up girl, smarten—"

She heard a noise.

Anna froze. Since they allowed her to take watch a month ago nothing had happened on any of her shifts. She peered off into the darkness but the only movement was the mist that formed on the forest floor. Her eyes were so full of tears that she wiped them twice. There was only darkness and silence out in the forest, but she *knew* she heard something. *It could just be an animal, maybe a coyote or a deer*. She could feel her heart start to pound in her chest.

Another noise.

It was a wheezy sound, like breathing out when you're sick, and she had heard it before. A rush of adrenaline released in her stomach and spread through to her fingertips.

"Paul," she half whispered, half exhaled.

There was no response.

"Paul," she hoarsely whispered again.

Across the clearing she saw the shape. No more than forty feet away it crouched, motionless. Anna felt like she was frozen in some terrible dream. She couldn't lift the rifle, she couldn't scream, she couldn't move. In a way this was suicide of a sort, paralyzed when she needed to do something fast.

The silhouette in the distance stood up. There was no doubting what it was. She could feel its cold reflective eyes on her own. It moved forward, toward her.

"Paul," she managed to get out, this time almost at voice level.

The shape stopped and crouched. Anna stared at it. She could make out its dark shape more clearly now. She felt the blood pumping through her arteries. Her cheeks were flushed and the hairs all over her slender body were on end.

Suddenly, like a whisper from heaven, Paul replied from the tent. "What?"

Hope returned with the sound of his tired voice. The shape heard Paul's voice too, and bent its head toward the sound. It seemed to sniff the air and after a short moment of silence it advanced again.

"What?" Paul angrily whispered.

His voice made the shape halt, this time only twenty feet away. Still Anna could not find the courage to reply.

"Anna, what the hell are you waking me up for?" asked Paul's frustrated and tired voice from the tent. "Deacon's shift is next, you know that. Now let me get some sleep. Anna…Anna?"

* * *

Paul abruptly realized what was happeing. They were being hunted and Anna had the gun. *Out of all of us, why did it have to be Anna*? Paul knew any quick movements would spur on the attack. But what could he do? He was tightly zipped up in a sleeping bag, in a closed tent. He might as well have been sealed in a coffin. Liv, now awake beside him, was moaning quietly. Scott, who was on the far end of the tent, continued to snore.

"Anna, how far away is it? How many are there?" Paul whispered.

Anna heard his voice but couldn't respond. The rifle was still in her arms but pointed at the ground. A thought came into her head that if she pulled the trigger the blast would wake everyone up. Then the situation wouldn't just be her problem or her responsibility. *If everyone was awake it would be their problem too.* Paul or Deacon, even Wes, would wake up and deal with it. They always knew what to do during encounters. They knew what to do when her parents were killed. All she had to do was pull the trigger.

Paul wondered why nothing had happened yet. *Why*, he thought bitterly, *did we let her have a watch?* He had argued against her and made himself look like an asshole by doing so. *But she's ready,*

Paul, Jen argued. *Anna has to feel like she contributes to the group.* But even Jen would have shot immediately if something approached the camp. Slowly, Paul undid his sleeping bag, while whispering to Anna.

"Don't make a sudden move, Anna. Listen to me, don't panic. If it sees quick movement it will attack. Very slowly aim the gun at it. Can you hear me? Anna?" Paul listened intently to the noises outside the tent.

Anna watched the creature renew its approach. She could see its eyes reflect in the starlight. It crept closer. She could hear Paul's voice continue in the background, but it wasn't registering. Closer. Anna knew she had to do something, and that something was to pull the trigger. Finally, as the creature came within ten feet and she could see its reflective pupils focus, an unknown voice in her mind screamed, and she squeezed her trigger finger.

The blast of the rifle set off a chain reaction. The bullet headed into the coals of the fire pit and a flash of sparks and debris flew toward the shape. For one clear moment she had a complete view of it. The creature, burnt and startled, vaulted backwards. Screams and the sounds of zippers ripping open came from inside the tents. The first person to emerge was Deacon. His axe sliced through the nylon door and his large frame quickly followed. The shape saw him and pounced. Like a barbarian, Deacon cleaved it as it attacked him. A sound like a whistling kettle erupted from the attacker. The force of the assault was so great that the shape tackled Deacon back onto the tent. The poles snapped beneath the weight of the two combatants and muffled moans came from the people being crushed inside.

Anna felt the rifle snatched from her hands. Barefoot and in his underwear, Paul reloaded the rifle as he ran toward the chaos.

"It's biting me, Paul!" screamed Deacon. His arms struggled to hold back the thing's demonic face. The creature was mortally wounded but it continued to fight ferociously. Paul arrived a moment before the beast could sink its fangs into Deacon's neck. He placed the barrel of the gun against its terrible head and with a blast the chaos came to an end. Paul stood above Deacon with the rifle

smoking and the sounds of the shot still echoing through the forest. Steam wafted up from the wound and mixed with the mist around them as dark blood spread onto the remains of the tent. Deacon pushed the lifeless body off himself as he struggled to stand up.

"Jesus Christ, Anna!" Deacon yelled. "Shoot first, ask questions later—you got the memo, didn't you?"

"I'm sorry," Anna whispered to the ground.

"It's okay, calm down, guys. Deacon, are you alright?" asked Paul while helping him up.

"My back is wrenched…I'm bleeding…and I think I got a pole up my ass."

"So nothing you're not used to!" joked Scott with a grin as he poked his head out of his undamaged tent.

"Oh, shut up," was all Deacon could come up with in response, but after a quiet moment he couldn't help but smile and laugh at Scott's comment. The rest of the group joined in.

Wes and Jen clambered out of the broken tent and surveyed the scene around them.

"Whoa!" was all Wes could say.

"That was way too loud. Are there any others out there?" asked Scott as he scanned the trees around them.

"Not likely or they would already be on us," said Paul.

"Another loner. Thank God," said Jen.

The girls moved to comfort Anna as the guys tended to Deacon's cuts. The gashes were shallow and Deacon didn't complain. The encounter shook up the group and set back their situation. One tent was now wrecked. They hadn't realize how important their shelter was until half of it was gone. Luckily it was a clear night, but the next time it rained all seven of them knew they would now have to stuff themselves into a three man tent. They would have to find something to replace the broken tent poles and patch the door, or to replace it entirely, and that wouldn't be easy.

It was a warm evening and the guys were willing to move under a tarp and sleep on the ground

while the girls slept in the remaining tent. It was Deacon's turn to watch, but Paul couldn't sleep after the commotion. Together they sat quietly by the fire, staring at the satellites moving slowly across the night sky.

Chapter 2 – Decisions

Wesley David – Entry # 2

Last night we were attacked for the first time in almost three weeks. A Creeper. I guess we were lucky that there was only one of them, if you consider being attacked at all lucky. Anna is pretty shook up. Paul argued that she wasn't ready for watch and we didn't listen to him. Well, Deacon and Jen didn't listen to him. They argued for her when she said she was ready to help. I suppose that Deacon probably learned his lesson (God knows Jen never will). Deek's got three bite marks down his side and I'm sure they hurt like hell. I was fortunate I wasn't hurt, as Deacon and the creature fell right on me. I've got some bruising but I didn't mention anything, especially after looking at Deacon's injuries.

We've got to do something. The weather has been nice for the last few weeks but in the morning you can see your breath. Fall will be on us soon and the only thing deadlier than the creatures out there is going to be the weather. We need a direction, we need a destination. Paul argues that we are safer when we're moving, and he's probably right, but we can't live the rest of our lives as nomads. There is simply no way we can go on like this when the snow and freezing temperatures come. Winter in these forests isn't just a hassle, it's deadly. We've agreed to head south, but without a car we won't get far, definitely not far enough to escape the weather. I don't know what we're going to do.

Living in one place attracts them, and the longer you stay, the worse it gets. They can sense groups of people. I think they can smell the humanity. Case in point was Anna's house. We were scoping her family's farmhouse right when it was attacked. Paul wanted to leave but Ryan insisted we help. We lost a good friend that night, and probably the best fighter out of us. He wasn't any stronger than Deacon, or smarter than Paul, but his attitude was so much better. He had lost as much as the rest of us: his home, his job, his family, and friends. But he found a way of leaving those things behind

and not dwelling on the past. Ryan wouldn't constantly talk about how great things were, or how much he missed this or that. He took each day as it came with courage and determination. Ryan Jeffries was a great guy and I miss him.

We need some kind of hope in our lives.

* * *

It was another cold morning when the group awoke. The camp was a disaster area with coals and soot strewn everywhere from the attack.

"So you found a pen and paper. What kind of stuff are you writing, Wes?" asked Scott as he packed up the broken tent.

"Just my thoughts. Like a personal journal, I guess," answered Wes as he put the book into his pack. "This is only my second entry."

"Dear Diary, Justin Bieber is so cute! I'm going to marry him one day!" mocked Scott in his most effeminate voice.

"I told you I'm going to marry Bruno Mars, so drop it," replied Wes.

Scott could be funny, but at times his comments could be too much. Deacon was the only one who consistently enjoyed his humor. It helped to relieve some of the tension around the camp, even when the jokes weren't good, but Scott would often take them too far, or stick with them until they weren't funny at all. His humor often angered the girls more than it cheered them up. Paul often took his jokes too personally, like they all had some kind of deeper, more sinister meaning.

"So where are we off to today?" asked Liv.

Liv was beautiful. Too beautiful. There was not a male in the group who wouldn't try to watch her when she would bathe in the lakes or streams they passed by. Her long blonde hair and deep set green eyes always attracted attention. Even Deacon, with his girlfriend Jen sitting right beside him,

would turn into a child around her. Jen was pretty too, with dark hair and brown eyes, but the kind of pretty that needed makeup.

The mornings had become routine and today was no different. Wake up and have a meager breakfast, usually consisting of some kind of canned corn or beans, and be on the way. They would savour the canned goods that in another time would have ended up donated to a food bank. Now the finest cuisine consisted of pie filler and lima beans. When they were lucky they came across a can of pears or pineapple slices in syrup. These delicacies usually went to the girls however. Liv was picky, even more so than the other two girls, and completely avoided the fresh meat they caught, instead opting to eat the berries and nuts found during their travels. She had been a vegetarian before April 11th, but that went out the window when it came down to survival. She was more than happy to devour a can of beef stew after a few days without anything but berries. Scott was the most willing to try out new foods. He was the first to eat squirrel, the first to puke-test potentially poisonous mushrooms, and the first to eat canned dog food. He was a good sport.

After breakfast the group gathered their stuff to load onto the ATV. Scott had nicknamed it *Matilda* and had already fallen in love with driving it, arguing and complaining when others wanted a turn. He had been a fan of cars and motorcycles and owned a nice truck before the world fell apart. He would still talk about it sometimes. Wondering where it was, and who (or what) was driving it.

Anna was still shaken up from the night before. She hadn't even cast an eye at Deacon since he yelled at her. Nobody could blame Deacon for being angry, but everyone in the group thought he should apologize. When Jen mentioned it to him, he laughed.

"I'd like to see you apologize after you've had your side split open," he said. "I'll apologize to her when she apologizes for almost getting us killed."

And so Deacon's quiet anger, and Anna's quiet shame, persisted.

"I'll ask again, where are we off to today?" asked Liv.

"We should take in a matinee, go shopping and maybe hit McDonald's," said Scott. No one

acknowledged him.

"Deek and I were talking last night and basically all we decided is that we need to have a group discussion about what we're going to do overall," said Paul. "It seems to me that we only have enough food for a couple weeks, and we're going to need to replace that tent. But those problems can be solved easily with a little determination. What we can't solve is that it won't be long until we are going to freeze to death if we continue to camp outside."

"Maybe we should head back to Edmonton. Maybe they have things under control," proposed Liv.

The group stirred with disagreement at the comment but Scott's argument came out the loudest. "There is *no way* I am returning to *that* city. You all know what it was like when we got out of there. It was chaos! If the Creepers didn't kill you than a looter would. Those army guys that were in there to protect us robbed Wes's parents of their food, and we all know there isn't much left in the city anyway."

"It was just a thought," stammered Liv, not pleased that her idea was shot down so suddenly.

"That's okay, Liv, we were looking for suggestions," said Deacon. Jen narrowed her eyes at him.

"We need to go south, or to the coast," added Wes. "The biggest danger facing us now is the cold, and it's the only danger we can realistically avoid. If we were in California we could spend the entire year in the forests there."

"Are there still forests in California?" asked Deacon. No one answered.

"Do you think the border to the States is blocked?" asked Jen.

"Borders schmorders, like it matters now, you all remember watching the news. The whole world is a write-off and the States had it as bad as everybody else, maybe worse," said Paul. "Going to the coast is a good idea, but how do we get the seven of us across the Rocky Mountains without a vehicle?"

"Well, we've managed to get this far," said Wes. "I think what we need to do is meet up with some human beings and find out if there is a place we can all go that's safe. Maybe a city somewhere has managed to pull it together, or maybe there's a place that other people like us are heading."

"Like *where,* Wes? Timbuktu? We've already talked about Utah and the insanity going on there, and I'm not going to open up *that* can of worms again," snorted Paul. "It's impossible to think anywhere has got it together yet, or ever will. Maybe a fort, or a castle, but *they* always find their way in, they're like goddamn roaches. I don't think a city is the answer. Ideally we want a quiet island somewhere."

"Like *where,* Paul?" mocked Deacon. "An island out in the middle of the forest? We can't keep this up. I know that *I* can't keep this up. We need a place where we can meet other people, and live. And even if we can't do that, we at least need to have that goal."

Everyone in the group agreed. There was a long silence. They were trapped in their own thoughts and the seemingly hopeless situation.

"If we do go for the coast, how do we get there?" asked Paul.

"I'm sure we can find a car or truck in a cabin or summer house somewhere," said Scott. "Remember at that place where Ryan and Liv got sick, there was that old car in the shed. It didn't run, but it goes to show you that people store them. If we could find some more gas, maybe in Hinton we could find an abandoned vehicle, maybe even something nice."

"That's an idea, but we need something good on fuel," said Deacon.

"Yeah, and something that will pick up the chicks!" said Scott with a grin. He got little reaction.

"So that's it, then. We find a car, some gas, and head for the coast. Sounds easy enough. Three years ago I went to the coast with my brother and it only took us fourteen hours from Edmonton," said Deacon.

"Something tells me it's going to take us a lot longer than that," snorted Wes.

* * *

They set off for Hinton, which was a good two or three days' march away, deciding they would stop at all the homes and cabins they found on their way to town.

They managed to find an old service road after a short time. It was one of those mountain logging roads barely maintained even during the good times. They climbed over fallen trees, jumped over pools of water, and stepped over gnarled dinosaur-bone-shaped roots. It was still early morning, and even in late August wisps of mist floated above the bogs and lowlands they passed. Looking at the fog gave them chills. On each side of the road tall aspens stood like prison cell bars with small blue flowers that grew in clusters at their base. The girls would often pick them and put them in their hair. Mountains rose in the distance, and even at the height of summer their frozen peaks still glinted in the sun. Two years earlier, they could have been a group of friends on a camping trip.

"Sometimes on days like this…it's like nothing has even changed," said Anna quietly.

"But everything's changed," replied Wes.

The group marched for three hours without a break until the ATV ran out of gas. They decided to stop for lunch at that point, a scant meal of cold cream of mushroom soup and freshly picked strawberries. At lunch they would seldom start a fire to cook, instead eating directly from the can to save time and effort. Each member carried their own utensils and the food was passed back and forth. It was not much of a lunch, but it was enough to quiet an angry belly for a short time. Over the past year everyone in the group lost a great deal of weight, especially Scott. The constant traveling and lack of food had by far the greatest effect on him, as he must have lost at least fifty pounds.

"Scott, every time I really look at you you're smaller," said Wes, who noticed his continually thinning body as they ate. "You're not a fat bastard anymore!"

"I'm only a bastard now, and I might not even be that for much longer if we don't find more

food. We're going to have to spend a day hunting again," replied Scott.

"How many bullets do we have left?" asked Deacon.

"We have six shells for the shotgun and twenty for the rifle," answered Paul, the keeper of the ammunition.

"What we need are M16s or Uzis," said Scott. "We could be like the A-team."

"I don't like our chances of finding anything around here. If we come across a dead army patrol we may have a chance of finding some good guns, but that's not likely," replied Paul. "I don't even like our chances of getting any more bullets."

After lunch the group abandoned the ATV and everyone took on their share of the supplies. They travelled for a few more hours without incident when they spotted a house.

Liv noticed it first. It was a newer looking summer home covered with the white stucco so common in the newer suburban neighbourhoods that she grew up in. The owner tried to camouflage it with vegetation but it still stood out against the green background of trees. The place was quite a distance away. To get there it would take a good hike down into a valley, across the Little Berlin River and up the side of a large foothill.

"What do you figure, Paul, is it worth the hike?" asked Deacon.

Paul took some time to reply. He watched the place carefully through the working eye of their old binoculars. They now used the set as a telescope as the other eyepiece had been smashed out in one of their numerous struggles.

"Well, as always, I can't see any movement. It's a nice sized home, there's a garage. Probably fifteen hundred square feet or so. I can't see anyone. Wait a minute...horses! There are two horses! They're tied up! We've definitely got some squatters," said Paul.

"How many do you think, Paul?" asked Liv.

"It's impossible to say, but I'm surprised they've managed to keep horses. People were eating horses last year. That's a lot of meat there, and they look like they're in good shape."

"You know I will not eat horse, Paul," stated Liv abruptly.

"Yes, we all know that," replied Paul. "But the boys and I will. That leaves the rest of the lima beans for you."

Liv mumbled a reply that the rest of them didn't hear.

"What do you figure, Paul? That's gonna be some hike across the valley, and I don't know how up I am for a fight today, my back is still pretty bad," said Deacon.

"How about the rest of you? Scott? Wes? Are you up for some horse meat?" asked Paul as he pretended to ride an invisible horse.

"Damn straight!" said Scott. "We'll be eating like kings tonight! Well, French kings anyway."

"I could use a good dinner," agreed Wes.

They decided to go for it. After some heated arguments it was finally agreed that the girls would stay behind on this adventure. As a group they hated to separate from one another unless absolutely nessessary. The girls rested against some nearby trees as the guys unloaded the gear and prepared the weapons. The shotgun was left with Jen to provide protection in case of emergency. Paul brought his rifle, Wes the hunting bow, Deacon his axe, and Scott his knives.

"You be careful. It's occupied, and if it's more than you can handle just come back," said Jen. "And remember, we won't be there to protect you, so don't go getting yourselves killed."

"Yes, dear," replied Deacon, kissing her goodbye. "We'll be back with a horse, or horse meat. I can tell Paul's got his mind set on it."

"That's what I'm worried about," replied Jen, shooting Paul a dirty look. "Be careful!"

* * *

The hike down to the river was treacherous. Knotted roots and fallen trees jutted from the hillside and the slope was far steeper than they anticipated. Deacon fell twice, reopening one of the

deeper cuts on his side. The group reached the riverbank in half an hour and stopped to drink.

"Maybe we'll find a fishing rod there," said Scott. "Fresh trout sounds even tastier than horse."

The Little Berlin River was more of a stream at this late stage of the summer. Small mossy boulders and dead trees criss-crossed the water. In only a few minutes they found an area they could cross where only their boots and ankles got wet. The water was low, but still icy cold.

After crossing the river the boys completely lost sight of the house and relied on Paul's sense of direction to lead them up the hill side. The south side of the river had less plant growth, and was not quite so steep, and proved to be an easier trek up the embankment than they expected. After a short hike toward their destination Paul stopped and turned to them.

"Okay, we're probably five minutes away. Remember, no one speak and use the hand signals we went over. When we get there let me do the talking and make noise only when I tell you to," whispered Paul.

They walked quietly down the road. As they drew nearer to the home, Paul reached down and picked up some of the assorted stones that lined their path. The rest of the boys followed closely until the home came into sight. It was set in a nice spot, with large south facing bay windows (now boarded) at its front. It was one of those summer retreats that wealthy people used to build, nicer than most people's everyday homes but used seldom over the course of the year. The boys took positions around the place: Paul and Scott at the front and Deacon and Wes around back. With horses standing outside the home, the boys knew the house would not be vacant. They were not disappointed.

From out of the forest a large stone flew at the front door of the cabin. It hit with a sturdy thud and smacked down on the front porch. The horses, startled by the sound, neighed and jerked. There were noises from the inside as Deacon tossed another rock at the back side of the house.

"There are twenty of us out here! The house is surrounded!" shouted Paul. He quickly moved south twenty feet so that those inside could not get his position. A commotion came from inside the house and a man's angry voice replied.

"We're armed! You'd get the heck out of here if you knew what was good for you! We have enough to worry about without our own kind hounding us!"

"We want a horse!" shouted Deacon from behind the house.

"Well, you're not getting one! Any of you show your face near those horses and I'll shoot! I have you lined up," replied the voice.

Paul looked at the house. There was an open window across from where the horses were tied up. It was clear to him they could not reach the horses without exposing themselves now. He realized they would have been better off trying to sneak one away. There was a pause while Paul tried to think of something.

"We'll burn the place down unless you give us a horse! I swear to God we'll start that cabin on fire!" hollared Paul.

"You little bastards wouldn't dare!" the voice yelled back. "I'm just trying to take care of my family. I'm calling your bluff. You light this cabin on fire and we're all as good as dead. It won't be half an hour and this place will be smothered!"

"He's right," whispered Scott to Paul. "He knows that's suicide."

"Either you let us take a horse, or I shoot both of them!" Paul called in reply.

There was a short pause.

"I don't even know that you have a gun!" said the man's voice from inside.

The man made a good point. Guns were hard to come across, and bullets were even harder.

"How do we know *he* has a gun?" whispered Scott to Paul.

"Yeah," said Paul, in complete agreement with Scott's comment. "How do we know *you* have a gun?" yelled Paul.

There was a sudden blast from the house. Paul immediately dropped to the ground for cover. Scott wasn't as lucky or as quick. Only inches from his head the bark of a poplar tree exploded. Scott stared stupidly at the smoking hole in the tree above him. His hair, face, and shoulders were covered in

small pieces of wood and bark.

"The next one hits its mark!" the man threatened.

"Well this is a pickle. What are we gonna do?" asked Scott, still covered in debris but regaining some of his composure. Paul had no answer as they lay tight against the ground. They couldn't get close to the house, and certainly not close to the horses. He could probably find a safe position to shoot one of the horses from a distance but Paul wasn't about to kill a horse and waste a bullet for no reason. He knew the man in the house could tell his threats were empty. And now he knew he was a good shot too.

"Shit, Paul," Scott said finally, "I don't know about you, but I didn't hike across that river for an hour for nothing."

"We're not leaving here empty handed!" yelled Paul toward the house.

There was another long pause. They were listening to what sounded like bickering from inside the house when suddenly they heard a woman's voice shout out, "Dinner."

Paul and Scott looked at each other puzzled.

"What?" shouted Paul.

"We will make you dinner," said the female voice. "So long as you leave my horses alone and leave after you eat."

Scott gave Paul a confused look and called back, "Dinner?"

Deacon's voice came from the other side of the house. "What are you cooking?"

"Moose stew and fresh garden vegetables," said the woman. There was a long silence. "We also have some alcohol."

"Deal!" answered Deacon happily from behind the home without any consultation with the rest of the team.

"But if you try anything funny, we will kill your horses," said Paul hoping to keep up the façade of hostility.

"Fair enough," said the woman's voice.

"Now, how many of you are there really?" asked the man.

* * *

Taking the food was as good a deal as they were going to get. The group witnessed many disturbing things over the past year. Violence, fear, and bloodshed were a part of their lives, but there was no way any of them would hurt or kill a person, or horse, without a reason. Paul was the only one of them who had killed a man, and he was not proud of it. It was in self defense, no one doubted that, not even Paul himself, but there was still no way that they would purposefully harm a family struggling to get by. Unfortunately, there were people out there who would.

Deacon and Wes came around from behind the house. Paul looked at Deacon angrily. "Thanks for consulting us."

"I'm sorry, Paul," answered Deacon sarcastically. "I forgot you were going to start a forest fire. That was a brilliant threat."

"We should have got one of those horses. It would be great to have a pack animal and a guaranteed source of meat," said Paul.

"Well, what were you going to do to get one? Siege the house? Charge down the door and murder a family in cold blood? We have nothing to back us up and they know it. You can try to sound as tough as you want, but we all know you weren't going to do anything. We're lucky we're even getting supper," said Deacon.

"Cut it out, you two. Besides, they said they have alcohol. I haven't had a drink since that bottle of Hennessey we found two months ago. We're due for a drink," said Wes, tired of listening to them.

After informing the people inside of the house of their deflated number, Wes left to go get the

girls for their free dinner. The other three boys rested on the forest floor with thoughts of tender moose stew on their minds.

Chapter 3 – French Kings

Wesley David – Entry # 3

I remember watching movies about the end of the world. In particular I remember Mad Max Fury Road. *In a post apocalyptic Australian outback, everyone wore leather, goggles, glitter, and had crazy hair of some kind, or none at all. They drove insane modified steampunk vehicles and rock and roll blasted while attractive actors and models fought each other.The end of the world was a gigantic desert without a plant in sight. Yet I'm surrounded by healthy trees and fresh grass. The air is cool and clean and there isn't a modified dune buggy in sight.*

I remember the movie Independence Day. *Immense spaceships blowing up the White House and the major cities around the world. One of those big blockbuster Hollywood movies where the hot good guys manage to save the entire planet, and with sass to boot. Will Smith punching an alien in the head near Area 51. It seems ridiculous now, but at the time I liked the movie. Yet I look around and there isn't a space ship in sight.*

How about one of those biblical movies? In those movies someone makes a giant sacrifice for the human race. Satan and his army of devils are thwarted by the might and wisdom of God. Yet I haven't seen any angels descend from above. I haven't seen the good and holy people be raised into heaven. I have seen some devils, but none of them carry pitchforks. They are animals with lungs and faces that bleed and die like us. When it first began, they said it was the start of hell on earth. Some said the apocalypse had come. Yet no Muslim, Jew, Christian, or Scientologist was raised to heaven, not even the Pope. We were all left here, alone and helpless on our rock.

As for us, I can't predict a Hollywood happy ending. We do have an ideal Hollywood cast with Paul's courage, Deacon's strength, and Scott's...well...humour. We have Jen's smarts and Liv's looks. We would even have a pretty good script.But we'd need to find a magic key that could turn back time, or decode a secret genetic virus that could rid the world of these creatures. In a movie there is

always a solution. A way out. Yet in this script we don't even know where we're going, or where tomorrow's food will come from. In Hollywood we would wake up in the end and it would all be an awful dream.

But there is one thing I have come to realize.

There is no waking up.

* * *

Wes volunteered to retrieve the girls. When he arrived back they packed up their supplies and tents and hid them beneath some underbrush to make the hike across the river easier. Wes preferred to hike with the girls. They kept up a less competitive pace; they were more interested in not slipping than in speed. The slower pace was also more ideal for conversation.

"So what kind of booze do they have?" asked Liv.

"They didn't say," answered Wes as they began their hike from the riverbed up the side of the mountain. "I suspect it's something made from their vegetable garden. Likely some kind of potato vodka or fermented beans."

"That doesn't sound particularly delicious," answered Liv. "I was thinking some fine caribbean rum. Mmmm…with Coke and a big hunk of lime."

Wes looked at her. He watched her licking her lips.

"But I don't care what kind of alcohol it is," continued Liv, "so long as these people are normal and the drinks are strong enough that we can forget all of this for one evening and enjoy ourselves."

"What exactly did they say was for dinner again, Wes?" asked Jen.

"Moose and fresh vegetables."

"Moose! That also doesn't sound very appetizing."

"They were out of happy meals. Besides, it's better than horse."

"True," Jen sigh.

The four of them arrived well before dinner. Paul, Scott, and Deacon were napping in the shade of a large willow tree outside the house.

All seven of them sat down together farther away from the house and rested. They could smell food being prepared inside as they listened to the breeze blowing through the trees and the occasional neigh from the horses. Scott's stomach could also be heard complaining loudly. They dozed for what seemed like an eternity, smelling the food inside, and listening to their own stomachs growl.

"Your dinner is almost ready!" yelled the man's voice from the house. "Now come and get it, and then get out of here!"

"Oh, Ted!" said the woman. "A guest is still a guest, and I'm sure these kids haven't had a nice meal at a dinner table for some time. Leave your weapons and come in to talk with us a while before your meal."

There continued to be some hushed arguments against leaving their weapons, but the man was set against them bringing weapons into the house.

"Screw it, I'm hungry," said Scott, dropping his knives on the ground and heading toward the house. Each member of the group looked at each other, shrugged, and fell in line.

* * *

The seven members of the group found kindness in the small house, and it was a night that they would remember well into the future. After some awkward introductions, and a slow start, they found that Ted and Sara Williams were good people who had also been through hard times. The Williams's story was typical for families in recent times. They lost their son during the fighting last year and had not heard from their daughter, who lived in Vancouver, for almost fourteen months since telephone service died.

Ted Williams was the owner of a plumbing supply company and his wife ran the bookkeeping. They were quite successful and managed to build this cabin, and a small horse stable, for their nearing retirement. They came here permanently when living in the city became unbearable after their business fell apart. "We found few people were interested in new sinks and in-floor heating after the water service got shut down," Ted dead-panned. When they arrived, they found squatters in the cabin. A small group of young men who put up a good fight, according to Ted. "I understand everybody's just trying to get by these days but you can't go and take a man's home…or a man's horse, for that matter," he looked up at Paul, smirking.

Sara Williams was a compassionate woman who seemed to hold sway over her husband. She was kind and motherly, and it created an instant bond between her and the girls. They talked and joked about doing their nails and the latest fashion trends. They had a great laugh about Liv's desire to put heels on her hiking boots. Sara glanced at Deacon more than once throughout the night. Her looks weren't sexual, but they lingered on his face and caught his eye. Deacon twitched under her scrutiny and was quiet as Paul and Ted talked with each other at the table. A quiet that spread to everyone when Ted asked Paul where they were going.

"I can't honestly say we have completely decided," answered Paul. "Our plan right now is to get to the coast before winter so we don't freeze to death. We're looking for a car and gas, of course. We thought that Vancouver Island might be a place where we can try to build a new life. We heard things weren't as bad there, and that there is still some law and order."

"I've heard that too, but I don't know if it's true. I've heard a lot of rumors that one place or another has got it together," said Ted. "What I can tell you is you're not the first group to come here and check our place out. We've had two other groups in this house, if you don't count the squatters when we first arrived. The first group's idea was to go to the U.S. They hoped that the military there would have things under control. The second group here was from the States, St. Louis, if I remember correctly. They came up here figuring fewer people would attract less trouble. It's a sad situation.

Vancouver Island sounds smart. If there are no portals on the island then it would be hard for those devils to get out there, although, I'm sure the bastards would find a way eventually."

"What about you guys?" asked Scott. "We tried to live in a cabin forty kilometres north of here and we were attacked—repeatedly. It's much safer staying on the move. We've survived for the last while picking through the remains of homes like this after they were ransacked. They'll find you eventually."

"They already have, kiddo," said Ted. "Twice we've fought off attacks. It's lucky Sara is a light sleeper, and has a great sense for danger, or we would both be goners. Each time there was only one of them, though. In total, I've killed eight, two that have attacked the house, and six while hunting." Ted walked to the front door and opened it. He returned with a large ring with three black leathery ears on it, one bluish mane, and four long black fingers. His prizes.

"All told we've killed eleven, mostly Creepers, but one Fang. In fact, only two nights ago we killed a Creeper that attacked our camp," said Paul with an undeniable pride.

The two of them tried to outdo each other with stories of their kills and the dangerous situations that they'd both been in for a short time, but when the words "Giant Black" were mentioned the entire group suddenly went awkwardly silent.

"I saw one two months ago. A Giant Black, the ones they talked about in the news," said Ted as a hush came over the cabin. "I was only three kilometres away in the valley. I saw the beast tackle and tear apart a bull moose. Scariest thing I've ever seen, and believe me when I tell you that I've seen a great deal in the last year. I had that moose in my sights and was ready to fire, when it suddenly raised its head. It sensed what I felt—complete dread. I knew a predator was near. It spooked when it saw the beast and began to run full tilt. Believe me when I tell you moose can run *fast* when they have to. I think the creature sensed me too as I lay camouflaged fifty meters away. Luckily, it was too interested in its larger score to worry about me and I managed to sneak away. If I can give one piece of advice for your travels, it's this: if you ever come across one of those things get the hell out of Dodge,

there's no way a bullet would take down a beast of that size."

The quiet hovered over the group after Ted's comments. They'd all heard of the Giant Black in the news before the power supply died. The pictures were of a massive bipedal monster; pitch black, and looking like it crawled fresh out of hell. It had horns like that of a great mountain stag, except sharper and of a shiny ebony. Its mouth was a pit of jagged and uneven yellow teeth, and its four fingered hands had long talons of bone. Its chest was unnaturally large for its frame, such that its great lungs could inhale a huge amount of air for the very worst of its awful abilities. A scream of such unnatural volume and pitch that it left all living things in its wake frozen with terror. But it was only one of the many unique and horrible dangers that lurked about, although it was among the worst, without any doubt.

"There you go again, Ted," said Sara, breaking the uneasy silence. "Some host you are. Every time you tell that story it gets bigger and bigger. You sound like a fisherman talking about the one that got away; next time you tell that story it will have been the size of the Empire State Building and will have torn apart a mountain. No more talk like that. Supper's ready, and so are the drinks, kids."

The dinner was both plentiful and delicious. Sara had put spices from her cupboard into the food, a commodity she would not be able to replace. Ted was a home brewer of wine and beer and he was happy to share some of his pilsner with the boys, while the girls delved into the home-made wine. It was the first meal the group ate at a dinner table for a very long time. It was like a family sitting down to dinner. The parents and children both got to play their roles again, if for only one night.

At the kitchen table Paul, Wes, Deacon, and Ted sat facing each other, discussing the future.

"Do you think they're getting control of the cities?" asked Wes.

"Honestly? No, I don't think that they are," replied Ted. "We left over four months ago, and things weren't getting any better. Money is worthless; you know that, so why get a job even if there was one to be had? The power would come on for a day and then the water. Everyone in the neighbourhood would start showing signs of hope. Then the water would die, and then the power.

Who would you call to fix it? Especially with no phone service. Four doors down our neighbour's house burned down while his family stood outside helpless, watching it burn to the ground. Can you imagine that? Watching your house burn down with no one to call and no water to fight it with. The neighbours, including myself I must admit, too scared to even go outside to offer support. We had no food to share with his family. It was brutal enough walking six kilometres to the river for water."

"We all left when the military took control of the food supply," said Wes.

"Yeah, and that's not all they took control of," replied Ted. "The gas stations, refineries, gun shops, hospitals, schools. They were all 'liberated' for the cause. I must say that some of them stayed honest, and they did their best to fight for those first few months. I guess things just got more and more hopeless, and who can blame them, really? If you're hungry and you've got the weapons, the food is yours. Simple survival. But who would have thought it would ever happen in this day and age?"

"So what made you finally decide to come out here?" asked Paul.

Ted seemed startled by the question, and scratched his cheek nervously. "Well, we knew that it would probably be safer out at the cabin, but gasoline is a very hard thing to come across. I…I managed to get some from our neighbour. I kept my car hidden in the garage and covered with junk from our attic to prevent anyone from knowing it was there. I also kept some gas hidden in the attic as a precaution." He paused and looked pale. "I don't like to discuss the night that finally made us decide to leave…."

There was a long silence. Paul and Deacon glanced at each other uncomfortably. Deacon was about to change the subject when Ted continued.

"We were very good friends with my neighbours, Jim Bradshaw and his wife Nancy. They lived beside us for over nine years and over that time we became close. Jim was a good man. He worked at an oilfield company and would often recommend contractors to me that I could sell piping to. He was one of the reasons I was as successful as I was. We would often play cards and drink

together on the weekends. In fact, they even came out here a few times."

Paul noticed Sara was listening to their conversation from the living room as the rest of the girls laughed at one of Scott's jokes. She seemed nervous.

"As things got worse and worse, Jim and I came to rely on one another. We would watch over each other's home when one would go for water or to the food lines. Jim had taken a set of walkie-talkies from the plant he worked at before it shut down. We stayed in contact that way. It was only a week after our neighbour's house burned down. The army food lines stopped a few days earlier. Most people at that point had either abandoned their homes for the country or formed into vigilante groups—much like you guys must have at that point. It was around four o'clock in the morning when I heard the walkie-talkie go off. I kept it on my night table because Jim and I would stay awake in shifts guarding the homes at night. Late that night I heard him over the walkie-talkie, *Jesus Christ, Ted, they're in your house!* he says. I instantly woke up Sara and grabbed my rifle. We were trapped in our bedroom. I waited for Sara to get dressed while I looked out our second story bedroom window. There was no way we could get down without breaking an ankle or hip, at least at our age. Young bucks like you might have been able to make a jump like that. We could hear commotion throughout the house. Breaking mirrors, thumps and bangs, you probably know that when they come in a group they have little use for stealth. The larger the group of those bastards the braver they get. We moved our dresser in front of the door and sweated it out for a short while. After a time I grabbed the walkie-talkie and called Jim. He replied that he hadn't seen them leave the house and thought it best we not talk and attract attention. We waited for another half an hour. When I was pretty sure they'd gone I left Sara in the bedroom, pushed aside the dresser, and made my way through the house. It was exactly like they reported in the news. Broken mirrors everywhere and the entire house ransacked. I made it into the kitchen when I heard a scream from upstairs. It was Sara…Scariest goddamn moment of my life."

By now Ted had drawn the attention of Scott and the girls and they sat silently listening to the story.

"So I ran upstairs expecting to find Sara torn to shreds, when I suddenly hear a gunshot blast from next door. It wasn't until I reached the top of the stairs and saw Sara standing there pale as a ghost holding up the walkie-talkie that I realized what happened. The screams weren't from Sara. They were from Jim's daughters over the walkie-talkie."

Sara got up and left the room, unable to re-live the story. Liv stared at Ted with her mouth wide open and her eyes huge from across the room. Anna stared blankly at the floor. A palpable uneasiness now came into the room. Outside, the sun had gone down and the mists had thickened into a wet soup.

"I screamed at Sara to lock herself in the room and I ran downstairs," continued Ted. "The front door was busted open, wooden splinters scattered across the front entry, damned things are strong, that's for sure. I ran across the lawn at full speed only to see Jim's front door was busted open much like mine. I saw my first one in the flesh that night. Before that moment it was only the news reports and pictures in the papers. It was a Creeper, covered in blood and running down the stairs, away from Jim. I fired at it and missed, only managing to put a bullet into their banister. The Creeper knocked me right over and escaped out the front door." Ted seemed to be seeing the events all over again as he stared into the distance, shaking his head with anger.

"Man. That's too bad you missed it, Ted," said Paul.

"Yes. I think about it a lot," he replied slowly. "But what I found inside was the worst of all.... Five of them attacked his house. Why they chose to abandon my house for his I'll never know. Perhaps they sensed danger, perhaps they could smell his kids, or our lack thereof. Anyway, Jim had managed to kill two, and survived. Upstairs his wife's body lay slumped over his bed. His youngest daughter's body was mutilated in the bathtub. They had stolen his older daughter Jennifer to distract him from his master bedroom. He chased her and the creatures down the stairs and out onto the street, but he was too late. So far as I know, her body was never found. When he realized the trap he ran back upstairs to find three of them feeding on the rest his family. Never underestimate those buggers."

The group was speechless. After a long pause, Wes was the first to say anything.

"That's terrible, Ted. We had something similar happen to us four months ago. We lost our good friend Ryan. It happened when—"

"Please Wes, I can't handle another story like that tonight," pleaded Liv.

"Unfortunately, I actually wasn't finished *my* story," said Ted. After a quiet pause he continued.

"Jim sat on his bed with his family torn apart around him. 'Jesus Jim, I'm sorry,' was all I could say. He was covered in blood, mostly his own. He was injured, but by no means fatally. After a few moments he spoke to me. 'I have two canisters of gas stored in the basement. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, I just thought if I kept it and things got bad enough here we could have used it and gone to your cabin in Hinton together. I guess I thought that things would get better, Ted. I really did. I have a good amount of food, mostly rice and canned goods stored in boxes downstairs. My gas, my food, anything in the house you want is yours in exchange for one thing: I need a shell.' It was clear to me what he would do if I gave him one of my bullets. He was hysterical in a totally calm way if you can understand my meaning. I tried to convince him that things could be different, that he was better

off alive than dead, that he could help Sara and me, or even take revenge. He gazed at me blankly and said, 'All that I have that matters is gone forever....There is nothing left for me now.' As he sat with his family butchered around him, and the rest of the world falling apart around us, I guess I understood. I asked myself what I would do if I were him. I shook his hand…told him it was a pleasure knowing him…and handed him his bullet. He asked me to close the door when I left. I did. I heard the gunshot as I walked down the stairs."

Ted looked down at the floor.

"So I took what I needed and set his house on fire to prevent those bastards from coming back for seconds. We packed up and left that night."

It was some time before anyone spoke. Ted stared at his empty glass, swirling the remaining beer foam in circles.

"I didn't tell that story to scare you," said Ted finally, after regaining a little bit of the composure he lost at the end of the story. "I'm sure you've all been through some of the same things, and I don't think that there's anyone out there who hasn't lost someone, or something. I'm telling you it was a mistake. You kids should never give up; never think you're better off dead than alive. Even when life seems like it's not worth living. It amazes me now to think people used to kill themselves because they lost their job or their wife left them. I wonder, after all the shit that the world has gone through, how many people have given up?"

"Another horrible tragedy in a world that seems filled to the brim," said Paul, glancing at Anna. "I can promise you no one here would ever do that, even if things get worse. We're gonna do everything in our power to build some kind of a life out of this mess."

The group nodded in agreement as Sara reentered the room. From the redness in her eyes it appeared that she'd been crying. From the nasal sound of her voice there was no denying it. "I suppose that you kids will be staying here tonight. You will have to grab your stuff from outside because I'm afraid we don't have many blankets."

"We'll be fine, Sara," said Liv. "And we would like to thank you both for the delicious meal and the hospitality you have shown us. Especially after what I hear was a tough introduction, to say the least."

Following Liv's example everyone thanked Sara and Ted. Deacon and Paul went outside and made the hike to gather up their gear and weapons. The fire from the small living room fireplace was low, making the unpacking difficult in the dark. The group slept together in makeshift beds in the main room, some on the large couch and some on the floor. It did not take long before snoring could be heard. After a long day they all welcomed a sleep indoors after a good meal. Above the cabin, the satellites slowly passed by.

Chapter 4 – Boxcars

Wesley David – Entry # 4

We've come into the fine home of Ted and Sara Williams for the night. It's nice to see some new faces and listen to some new voices and new problems. I guess that sometimes change can be a good thing.

I remember learning in school about change. In science we learned about thermodynamics and the changing of matter, phases and entropy. We learned in history about the end of eras and great revolutions, but we never learned about the slow everyday change that we all go through. It's happening every second of every day without pause. It's a lot like time except it speeds up and slows down in fits and starts. Maybe time and change are the same things. The day begins cool and warms up, only to cool down again. It begins dark and brightens up, only to become dark again. Plants grow in the spring and thrive in the summer, only to die in the fall. The more I think about time and change, the more pointless life seems. We begin as sunlight and soil and are slowly turned into plant material. We are digested by one form or another only to be digested again and again and again. Finally we form into a multiplying cell and grow into an organism for a tiny stitch in time only to return so quickly back to the dirt.

What we see as long stretches of time are like a speck of sand on a beach compared to the time it took the rivers to cut the rocky canyons in the mountains. Even the formation of these canyons is

miniscule compared to the formation of the earth, and the formation of the earth is but a flash compared to the formation of the universe. Where does it go from there? The big bang and its reformation is probably just a constant heartbeat that has been going on for infinity.

So what does one rotten life, on one rotten little infested planet, matter in the big scheme of things? Nothing really matters in the big scheme of things. It will all be long forgotten.

It becomes easier to understand religion when you begin to think about the deeper meaning of things. Without a God there is so little meaning to life. Yet, I know that he, or she, doesn't exist. Or do I? Who made God? If God always was, then why can't the universe have always been? Why would a being of perfection create so much imperfection in the world? How many millions of people have asked that question before? They say God works in mysterious ways. I think he's an arrogant asshole. They preach so much about forgiveness in the Bible. Then why the hell couldn't he forgive Eve for one lousy goddamn apple? If this whole mess is just a test of his, or hers, I ask, why do you have to test us? For what? Why so much misery?

As always I seem to ask myself more questions than I can answer. I think that the real answer is that there aren't any answers.

* * *

Paul awoke to the hand of Ted Williams over his mouth. As he slowly gained consciousness, Paul began to struggle and tried his best to scream.

"Smarten up and get a hold of yourself," whispered Ted. "There's something outside." He removed his hand abruptly and went to the window.

Paul sat up, breathing hard in the darkness. Over the last few months Paul learned not to sleep too deeply, but the alcohol and large meal from the previous night, combined with sleeping under a roof on a relatively comfortable floor, made him relaxed enough to sleep like the dead.

From outside, Paul could hear the horses nicker uneasily.

He quietly grabbed his rifle and went the window to join Ted. Ted looked at him and reached into the pocket of his worn jean jacket. He handed Paul some shells. After closer inspection Paul realized they were *his* shells, and that his rifle was empty. Ted smiled uncomfortably and whispered, "You can't be too careful these days."

There was no time for Paul to react as another sound came from outside. Both he and Ted heard it. Paul peered into the murk outside the window but could see little. His eyes and senses improved as sleep eroded from the steady pumping of adrenaline in his veins. Out of the blackness, subtle shades of grey began to appear. Paul could see the pasture, and then the fence. He began to see the outline of the two horses, with their heads bobbing up and down in anticipation. On the ground a thick mist collected, a common sight since The Arrival, and it made it look like the horses stood in a layer of snow. Paul loaded his rifle.

"Can you see anything, kid? My eyes aren't so good as they used to be," said Ted as he squinted into the gloom.

"I'm starting to make out some shapes. I can't *see* any creatures if that's what you mean. The horses are clearly uncomfortable, and I can feel it too. I can sense danger. Can you feel it?"

"A little," replied Ted quietly. "Sara woke me up, she's very perceptive to those sensations you're talking about. She's always had some ability with that kind of thing, an ability that's only gotten stronger since The Arrival. She's woken me up many times when danger was near. Heck, even before this mess she's had a…perception…that scared me. One time a few years back on the night my brother died, she—"

"Whoa, I see one!" interrupted Paul. "Can you see it? I think its going for the horses, that moving black shape….See?" Paul pointed out into the blackness.

"No, I don't," replied Ted. "What do you figure we should do?"

Paul was surprised by the question. It was Ted's home, and Ted's horse. Paul couldn't help but

be flabbergasted.

"What I mean is, do you think we should wake everyone up? Should we sacrifice a horse? Have you been in a situation like this before?" Ted was searching for leadership.

"I think we should wait it out and see, but regardless, we need to wake everyone. I'll watch outside and you get everyone up. Scratch that, get Sara to wake everyone up. Your method nearly made me shit myself," said Paul, who reluctantly accepted the burden. "Get any weapons you've got and please make sure they're *loaded,* Ted," Paul's eyebrows gave away the connotation in his voice. Ted went away on his duties without a reply.

At least we'll all be awake if they bust in here, Paul thought. *Staying in a house is goddamn suicide, why couldn't we just eat and go?*

Out of the darkness came a sudden crash at the front door. The attack had begun.

* * *

Scott dreamt about women. It wasn't an all out sex dream, with lots of screaming and licking and thrusting, but more like one of those dreams when sex is almost about to happen but always seems to be out of reach. The kind of dream that if you remember it when you wake up, you quickly try to go back to sleep to get back into it. When Scott awoke to the crash he had no thoughts of returning to bed. His first thought was to grab his pants but as the cobwebs cleared, he knew he should go for a weapon first. Showing off his ugly legs mattered little if his face was bitten off.

* * *

Liv was woken from a dreamless slumber by the noise. Her first instinct was to dive under the coffee table for cover, and it was there that she stayed hidden for some time.

* * *

Wes finished writing in his notebook an hour earlier, and had not yet fallen into a deep sleep. He was thinking about his writing and wondering if it was helping to make him feel better. He realized he had become very bitter from the whole situation. *My next passage*, he thought drowsily, *will be positive, it has to be.* He had just fallen sleep when the attack began.

* * *

Deacon was snoring and dreaming of Liv. Again. She had invited him into her apartment and they kissed. Deacon awoke to the attack with a feeling of guilt.

* * *

Anna realized there was something a little different about Sara Williams. She didn't know if the others noticed it, but she certainly had. Sara talked to them like she knew them and asked questions about people and events that Anna was sure they had not mentioned. It was subtle, but Sara seemed to know far too much. She had a sense and a perception about her, one that reminded Anna very much of her own. Anna dreamt she was sitting in her mother's lap having her hair brushed. Except her mother was Sara.

When she awoke she thought she was back at her parents' house, reliving the nightmare.

* * *

Jen loved Deacon a great deal, though at times it was easier to act annoyed with him than it was to show her true feelings. Her favourite part of the day was bedtime. They would often go to bed earlier than everyone else to be alone together. The lack of proper nutrition, constan physical and mental stress, and serious weight loss had made her cycles stop, but sex was still dangerous. While becoming pregnant was unlikely at this point, it was the last thing the group needed. Before bed that night she could see Deacon staring at Liv. Jen liked her but she would protect what was hers. She woke from an unpleasant dream to the sound of the assault.

* * *

Paul aimed his rifle at the inverted black leg that was now halfway through the door. The rifle let out a bellowing blast made even louder from echoing in the small confines of the cabin. His eyes were fully adjusted to the gloom and he realized that he hit it, but not where he aimed. He missed the leg he was going for and instead managed to blast a bullet through the door and right into whatever was behind it. The leg quickly withdrew with a hiss.

"Everyone up and to the windows and doors!" screamed Paul.

There was chaos around the cabin. Anna dove under the coffee table to join Liv, Scott jumped toward his pack, and Jen ran for the corner. Deacon stood dazed in his underwear in the middle of the room, staring at Paul.

"Deek! Grab the shotgun and get to the window," Paul bellowed.

Deacon responded as if snapped out of hypnosis. Paul watched as he grabbed for his pants.

"No time for clothes, Deek! Grab the gun!" yelled Paul again.

Suddenly, a blast came from the main bedroom, followed by a crash and a thud. Sara Williams scrambled out of the room, clothed in oversize pajamas. Ted quickly followed her out, slamming the door behind him. Paul watched as a black fist smashed right through the middle of the door as it

closed. It was a Creeper. Its arm bent through the opening it created and its long black fingers reached for the handle. It was among the worst, and most common, of the creatures they faced. Unfortunately, it was also one of the most intelligent. Its long black fingers had jagged claws, and compared to human hands, they were massive. There were only four fingers on each hand, and each digit had an extra carpal that gave it an unnatural bend. The hands were designed to bring meat toward a mouth filled with teeth that were crystalline, and razor sharp.

"Down, Ted!" yelled Paul as he aimed at the hand. Ted dropped to the floor instantly and Paul let another shot fly, this time hitting his mark. The hand exploded, splattering a blood so black it stood out in the darkness.

An explosion of breaking glass quickly erupted from behind them. It was another creature skulking outside of the window. It reared up to its feet and surveyed the room for its first target. Liv's scream echoed through the cabin as loud as any of the blasts.

Fortunately, Deacon was now fully awake. His shotgun let fly a blast and the creature's head blew apart, flinging more black fluid around the room. He stood still in his ratty underwear, holding a smoking shotgun, and covered in Creeper blood.

Wes had the sense to light a candle. His hands shook as he brought the match to the wick. There was silence. They could hear the remaining creatures' feet scuttle across the cool grass in retreat.

No one moved as they waited for more. They barely breathed.

Sara Williams was the first to break the long silence. She quietly walked over and crouched beside Anna. They could all hear her breathing now, a panicked kind of squealing. Anna was in shock. Sara talked quietly and caressed her blond locks like she had only moments ago in a dream. "It's okay, honey, it's over now."

Paul walked to the window and looked out. "They got a horse, Ted. I guess they decided it was enough meat for tonight."

"Son of a bitch," was all Ted could muster.

Creepers were vicious hunters, but smart enough to abandon prey if they decided the risks were not worth the reward. Wes told them about the hunting strategies he studied while taking zoology. He explained that the strategies that these creatures used went far beyond anything he learned while studying lions or wolves. The creatures were opportunists, never attacking when, or where, it was expected. Only desperate hunger would drive them to be reckless. They avoided prey that was prepared and ready to mount a reasonable defense, yet they also seemed to know when prey was most vulnerable. Deacon once told the group a story of how he had been surprised by them, when both he and Jen were on a bathroom break in the forest. Deacon always joked he had scars on his ass, and according to Jen, he really did. Paul constantly told the group they should always be ready, for anything. They let their guards down tonight, and they were lucky they had not paid a greater price.

Ted surveyed the damage to his home. There was broken glass everywhere, black blood spattered across the walls, and pieces of wood and drywall scattered about. He moaned when he saw the destruction to his front entrance.

Ted looked at Paul and wryly commented, "You do realize that you're paying for that door, young man."

Paul looked back with eyebrows raised. "Cash or credit?"

Chapter 5 – Sharks and Mermaids

Wesley David - Entry # 5

After the events of last night, we have decided to stay at the Williams' cabin for a few more days. Paul doesn't like it, but even he needs a rest. We were attacked by a group of Creepers, and while no one was seriously hurt, we got quite a scare and a good reminder of what happens when we let our guard down and try to live normally. At least they don't usually attack twice in a row. Usually.

Deacon managed to kill one with the shotgun while standing in his underwear. It was something to see – both him covered in black creeper blood and the fact that he really does have big scars on his ass from the time he was surprised while taking a dump in the forest—Jen was right.

Anna is not in a healthy state of mind. I think she may be starting to lose her grip. Not that losing your sanity would be a difficult thing to do under these circumstances. It would almost be a nice escape from the constant dread. Anna seems to have formed a bond with Sara Williams. I wouldn't be surprised if she decided to stay, although she should know better. Staying in one place for too long is suicide. We continue to learn that lesson over and over again.

* * *

"So where would you go, Ted?" asked Paul. He and Ted finished a small lunch Sara brought out to them and they were sitting alone together on two large stumps. The rest of the group was outside gathering firewood, except for Anna, who still refused to come outside. Ted had a great deal of wood stored already, but they felt they owed something in return for the hospitality.

"I can't say I know, Paul," answered Ted. "If there was somewhere that I knew was safe and secure I would likely go there myself. Your idea of the coast isn't bad. It's gonna be real tough this winter for us to stay warm, and if you guys are not going to stop and make a home, you'd better get

south. The truth of the matter is that nowhere is safe. When the portals first opened there was nowhere that went untouched. Even remote islands out in the middle of the Pacific."

Paul remembered hearing about that. Many people, especially the rich and famous, flocked in the weeks after April 11th to Pacific islands while their money still had value. Paul had no idea of what ever became of them, but stockpiled with food, guards, and weapons, they were likely a lot better off than he was.

"Or you could always join those crazy bastards who went into the portals. The thousands of soldiers and nuts who never returned. Now that would be the ideal way to shorten your journey," Ted scoffed.

"I admit I considered it momentarily, when the attacks first began. They sure made it seemed like it was a valiant thing to do. *Save your family, save our world*—wasn't that the slogan? I had friends who joined up, but I've never heard of any of them making it back. I do remember seeing a report about a group of Chinese soldiers showing up from a portal near Calgary all beat up and starving. They had some unbelievable stories to tell. Have you ever seen one before?"

"A portal? I can't say I have, well, besides on the news. I'm glad, too. Nothing good has ever come out of them. I've heard some strange stories about what's inside," answered Ted.

"Like what? That garbage about it being a gateway to hell, I think that's religious bullshit," said Paul, shaking his head in disgust.

"I do, too, but there are many people who think this is the end. I somehow think God would have come for us by now if it were. Well, at least for the good people. There's got to be a few of them out there somewhere, right? No, I've heard some strange rumors, Paul. I've heard the portals don't even lead to where the creatures come from, that there are portals on those worlds that come from yet another world and so on and so on. Each of them infested with these organisms. Although, Sara doesn't think so. She says its one world. Earth's twin. She says it's the male to our female, a Yin to the Yang, kinda thing. Christ, I'd say she's nuts but she's been like this since the day we met, years and

years before any of this mess. I've heard it all, Paul, rumours that make Hollywood movies seem tame. Science, magic, aliens, religion. The truth is that it's impossible to say exactly what's on the other side until you're there."

"I've heard it all too, but do you believe any of it?" asked Paul.

"Why not? Look around us. What seemed impossible two years ago has all changed in one horribly impossible day. We were all forced to wake up out of a wonderful dream into this nightmare. Everything I believed in, the science, the structure, it all just came collapsing down around me. So why can't it be true? At least some of it, anyway."

Paul had no response. He did his best not to think about it. Wes did, he constantly theorized and talked about what happened and the why and the how. He had far out theories about aliens or magic, or that it was all a dream. Wes was naturally curious. His family wouldn't let him sign up with the portal forces, or he may very well have gone with them. Paul himself felt that thinking about the *why* and the *how* would do nothing in the end to help the *here* and the *now*.

"I try not to think too deeply about what's going on," said Paul. "The thought that this is the Apocalypse scares the shit out of me."

"Yeah, me too, kid, me too," agreed Ted.

"But thinking that there are some kind of aliens, or magic, or spirits on the other side of that portal scares me just as much," said Paul. "I definitely think we should take our chances on this side. It's just, I don't know if we can make it…we have come so close to dying so many times, our luck can't hold up. They all come to me for answers and I don't know, I just don't know." A rush of emotion came over Paul and he couldn't keep it inside. "We lost my best friend Ryan…and I've had to take his place. Not exactly easy shoes to fill, either. I've lost my family, my girl. I don't know. It's not fair. Every day I wake up thinking how much all of this sucks. It just sucks, you know?" Paul looked at Ted with puffy red eyes. His voice became scratchy, and he realized he was quietly sobbing.

"Paul, you asked me where *I* would go. The coast. Go to the coast. I know you guys can make

it; I've seen you in action. Deacon's tough and I can see from last night that he's brave. Wes is a smart one, and Scott's got the right attitude, bad jokes or not. I can't say enough good things about the girls either. Anna has got some issues but you can't blame her after what happened to her family. You guys will be okay." Ted put his hand on Paul's shoulder. "We've all lost something, and we all miss what our lives used to be. You have to keep on going. You deal with the punches life throws at you, pull up your socks and fight until you can't fight anymore."

Paul looked up and smiled. His emotions began to fade and he now felt embarrassed about losing his composure. He wiped away his tears as best he could. Ted continued.

"You're a natural leader, Paul, I've seen it. Last night even I came to you for it. You're tough and confident and you make other people feel that way about themselves. You have got to take this rag-tag group of yours somewhere safe. Protect and lead them. Make that your reason for waking up in the morning. Hell, if it weren't for Sara, I don't know if I could go on. Focus on that and—"

"What is this, a knitting circle?" yelled Scott from across the clearing as he and Wes dragged a tree in from the forest. "You know what they say, less talk, more chop!"

Paul quickly turned away and hid his face. Even at a good distance away Scott realized from Paul's body language his comment was badly timed.

"Sorry, Paul, I didn't mean anything, I—"

"No, it's nothing," said Ted getting up to greet them. "I had Paul laughing pretty hard there….Here, let me help you with that tree. Paul, go grab me my other axe out of the shed."

Paul quickly walked off without a word.

"Well, you'll have to tell me that joke, Ted!" said Scott. "I'll add it to my arsenal."

* * *

Anna sat quietly on the couch with one of the Williams' large brown blankets wrapped around

her. She had barely spoken a word since last night's attack. It was as if she were reliving that horrible night when her own family was killed all over again. It was so similar, black arms with long fingered hands breaking through the windows and doors. She had recurring nightmares about those hands. They would come through the floorboards, out of the toilet, from the cupboards and fridge of her parents' home, grabbing at her with those sinewy black fingers. The very same hands that took her family from her, the very same that tore them apart.

"Stop it, Anna," she whispered to herself, "you *are* stronger than this." Tears came again. Her nose was running and her lips were chapped. *I must look horrible,* she thought to herself. *You're such a burden. How can you do this to them? Toughen up!*

"Anna, are you beginning to feel any better, hun?" asked Sara as she set down a cup of tea and sat down beside her.

"Yes, I am, Mrs. Williams. Thank you." Anna forced a small smile.

"Come now, Mrs. Williams is Ted's mother's name. There we go, a smile, that's what we're looking for," said Sara as she reached over and pulled some of Anna's tangled hair from her mouth. "Anna, I know you have been through a great deal of pain. I could sense it when you entered my home."

"Does my aura give off the messed-up-girl vibe?" Anna asked morosely.

"I wouldn't say that I could sense your aura, exactly. Well, maybe, but anyone could notice from the way you talk right down to the way you hold yourself that you seem defeated," said Sara.

Anna looked up at her. *What the hell is this? Is she trying to make me feel better? Why won't this woman just leave me alone?*

Sara's eyes widened as if she could hear Anna's thoughts. "Let me finish. You see, we have all been through a great deal. I have lost my children, and friends. Ted is all I have left. The only thing that keeps me from breaking down is that I know that it's not only them that I miss, it's also the life I had. I know that if I had died instead, I would have wanted my children to go on, even in this terrible

mess of a world. You have to let go of the past, because if you cannot, there will be little hope or happiness in your future. I see things ahead of you Anna, *big* things."

"It's just so hard, Sara. My mother was killed right before my eyes, my dad's gone with her, and the group lost their precious Ryan trying to save us. We abandoned them all to die and I didn't do anything. I froze. I always freeze!" The tears erupted again.

"No one blames you and you're not alone. Rick and Gail are fine where they are now. They are watching over you, but you have to let them go, Anna. You have to remember the positives, like how you have hooked up with a great group of friends. I sense good things from all of them, and each has their own strengths and their own weaknesses, as you do. I know you have some incredible shoes to fill, but you still have much to offer this group. Your wisdom seems well beyond your years, and I can see my own ability is within you…strong, indeed…but they cannot take you with them if you do not pull yourself together. It is not your physical burden that would weigh them down but rather how you will affect their spirit."

Anna knew that what Sara was saying was true, she had to pull it together. "I know, you're right. I'm okay now." Anna let out a sigh and shook her head. "I'm going to clean up in the bathroom and I'll go outside and help with the wood. Thank you, I appreciate your support and advice."

Sara put her hand on Anna's shoulder. "You're a bright young woman, Anna, go show them what you're made of." Sara smiled, got up and returned to the kitchen.

Anna couldn't help but feel she'd been given a lecture, but it had been a long time since an adult gave her a lecture, and she actually appreciated it. She could see a great deal of her own mother in Sara. Anna wiped her eyes and headed to the bathroom to wash up. She felt much better, and the lump in her throat was shrinking and the swelling of her eyes was beginning to subside.

But throughout the rest of the afternoon while gathering wood, Anna couldn't shake one thought: *How did Sara know my parents' names?*

Chapter 6 – The Thief

Wesley David - Entry # 6

Leaving sucks. We all know that we have to go, but that doesn't make the process any easier. After the attack three days ago, we've continued to find reason after reason to stay. We helped Ted and Sara clean and repair damage to the house, we helped gather wood for the winter.

I'm going to miss a dry, warm place to sleep, I'm going to miss consistent meals and good company. But most of all, I'm going to miss having a home. It's the same for all of us. Paul is the most insistent that we leave tomorrow. He wants to get closer to the coast before fall hits, and we all know that he's right. We were supposed to go this morning but Anna said she needed one more night, and we used the day to hunt. Paul managed to score a small deer. Ted is going to give us some of his own cured meat and in turn he will keep the meat from today's kill. That's good news for us because no one in our group is particularly skilled at skinning and cutting up the carcass. It's disgusting, and even after a full day without food I can still lose my appetite watching the butchering of an animal. I prefer my meat in the form of a Big Mac or Whopper. Meat used to be so easy: buy a nice red strip and toss it on the barbecue, add some sauce, flip, repeat. The truth is that preparing meat is a sickening procedure: breaking tendons, removing innards, gross smells, flies, hot blood pooling on the ground beneath the kill, cold lifeless eyes staring at you with a "How can you live with yourself?" gaze. It makes it easy for me to understand why Liv refuses to eat it, and why people are vegetarians. But I would still kill for a quarter-pounder right now.

I'm not looking forward to tomorrow's goodbyes. Ted and Sara have treated us well and it's good to know that there are still people with hope and generosity in their hearts. I feel rested, even after the attack. I have the feeling I used to get the night before the first day of school, or before going on a long trip. Anxiety mixed with excitement. We're going on a journey tomorrow. It strikes me as so strange; who goes on journeys anymore? Maybe Bilbo Baggins or Harry Potter, maybe characters in

books and movies, but me? Who would have thought in a thousand years I would be going on a journey that was anything greater than to the corner 7-11 for Wonderbread. I definitely feel excited, and I think many of the others do as well. Deacon has been almost as itchy to go as Paul. Jen and Liv seem determined, and neither of them complained when the decision was made to leave tomorrow morning. Scott is always happy to go with the group. Even Anna has improved over the last few days and has agreed that tomorrow is the day.

Our bags are packed, our food is stored, the guns are loaded and the weapons are ready. It's going to be the camping trip from hell.

* * *

It was a cold and cloudy morning as Paul and Deacon waited outside the front door of the cabin. The air was moist and small billows of mist moved silently over the tree tops and across the valley below. Paul was reminded of the oncoming winter and how little time they had to get somewhere warm. The sky was beginning to lighten and he could still see many of the brighter stars on the horizon. It made him think about the satellites again, still moving slowly across the sky.

"Well, are we ready to do this?" asked Deacon quietly.

"I guess we better be, pal. I'm ready as ever."

"Yeah, me too."

Paul thought about how strange it was that the time of day affected the volume of their voices. In the pre-dawn everyone whispered. The world was quiet at this hour. Even the birds had not begun the early morning squawking.

"Is everyone else ready, Deek?" asked Paul.

"Scott's behind and complaining like he usually does. I don't know how he used to make it into work in the morning, my God, he's miserable early. Most important, Anna is cleaned up and

ready to go. The girls are packing up some last minute stuff," Deacon confirmed.

Ted came out the front door and shook Paul and Deacon's hands, wishing them luck.

"I wish I had more to offer you than just the meat."

"Ted, you've done too much for us already, we can't thank you enough," said Deacon.

"Let me give you one last piece of advice, then. I've heard Hinton isn't too bad yet, and some folks there are still willing to help out travelers like yourselves. I know a man there, George Wilson. I can't say I vouch for him, by any means, but he may be a man you should see. He owned the local hardware store in town and his brother was the contractor that built this cabin. He was a pretty bad drinker back before April 11th, likely not so bad now. I have his address here for you and also a nice unopened bottle of dark rum. I'm sure you can use it to trade with him, and if I remember correctly, he loves his rum. I know for a fact he had heaps of rifles and shells in his basement. He sold me mine after the gun control legislation went through. He ran that whole store so he should have a good stash of other items to trade. I've heard from a few travelers that his house is a trading post of sorts, at least, it was a couple of months ago. You can try to trade the rum with him, if he's not dead or gone. Or, if you're not going to Hinton, then you can have a drink on me and Sara and remember your time here with a smile."

Paul accepted the bottle from Ted. "You and Sara have done so much for us, thanks again. Maybe someday, if all this gets sorted out, we'll return and share some stories."

"I'm sure you'll have many," smiled Ted.

Most of the group gathered at the front of the cabin, put on their packs and readied for the march ahead. Scott finally came out, still half asleep, with his hair cow-licked and his eyes half closed.

"Good morning, sunshine! I trust you slept well!" teased Paul as Scott stumbled down the front steps.

"Fuck off," was all Scott could muster. Early mornings were the only time Paul could get a comment in edgewise, and he always did his best to take advantage of it, despite knowing he would

pay the price later.

Sara came off the front step and pulled Deacon aside to speak to him alone. Paul thought it was strange, as she did this with no one else. After a moment, the rest of them noticed as well, and watched with growing curiosity as Deacon and Sara spoke. Deacon's head nodded over and over, a strange expression on his face. She then handed him what looked to be a note and kissed his forehead. Jen watched the two of them with intense suspicion. After their whispered conversation finished, the girls said goodbye to Sara. With a final wave, they began their campaign again.

When they were out of hearing distance Deacon whispered, "The bottle is great, but I was hoping for the horse."

"So was I, man, so was I," replied Paul quietly.

* * *

Ted and Sara Williams did not speak for some time after the group of young men and women left. Sara returned to her knitting and Ted continued to split and pile up wood for the impending cold. As he hewed the logs a burning curiosity grew in his mind. What had Sara said to the young man? What had she given him? It was not jealously that made him curious, they had been together far too long for that, it was a powerful sense that he had overlooked something. The more he thought about it the harder he chopped, until sweat rolled down his cheeks and his muscles ached.

After a time Ted came inside for a drink.

"They seemed like a nice bunch of kids, eh, didn't you think? You know… I…I actually thought at first that maybe they were the ones."

Sara continued to focus on her knitting. "They were."

Ted abruptly coughed up the water halfway down his throat and dropped his glass. It blew apart on the kitchen floor.

"Wha?…What! How can that be?" erupted Ted between coughs. "You said it would be five men and two women!"

"I know I did. And that is what I saw. But it was *them*. There is no doubt in my mind, or in my heart."

Ted ran to the door and began to put his boots and jacket back on.

"What exactly do you think you're doing?" asked Sara calmly from the chair, still counting her stitches.

"I'll find them. I should be able to catch them easily on Sunset. I'll give her to them along with the saddle. I can walk back easily enough, maybe I can even make it back before dark. They could use our rifle too, we'll have to get by with the knives. We've got that rice and those cans in the cellar I should load for them too."

"Stop, Ted," said Sara calmly, finally raising her head. "Come and sit down with me for a while. We have done all that we can, and should."

"But your dreams! I've been hearing about them every goddamn day for almost two years now! You said *everything* depends on them. We have to do all we can, no matter what the sacrifice," said Ted.

"No, we can only play the role we were meant to play. You judged them for yourself, Ted. I never told you to give them that bottle. I know it was dear to you, and you gave it of your own accord. It is how it should be," answered Sara.

"But the group is not how it should be!" said Ted, exasperated.

"No, it is not. But we cannot change what has already been done. Be glad, my love, I have passed on the words the dream told me. We have done our part, all that was asked of us, and for my sake, perhaps, I will finally sleep soundly tonight."

* * *

With the cabin behind them, the seven companions made their way down into the valley and back to their original course. There was little talk as the cold and exercise was a rude awakening after the four days of relative comfort and rest. Deacon led the pack, with Paul right behind him helping with direction. Wes walked with the girls in the middle and Scott followed up the rear, still grumpy and half asleep. They took a late morning rest in a forest clearing. The mosquitoes were vicious. After a small breakfast of dried moose and carrots they all sat back down to decide on their plan of action. Paul told them about the rum and Ted's suggestion.

"So it seems to me that we should probably try to find this guy. Either way, we need gas for a car and our best chance is in town somewhere," Paul concluded.

"Ted said this guy was a drunk," remarked Liv. "That doesn't sound very positive to me. Maybe we should keep it for a cold night in the future."

"Well, drunk or not, he's supposed to have guns," said Deacon. "I've got two shotgun shells left and Paul has what? Sixteen? As much as we all love my axe and Scott's knives, without more ammo I don't think we'll last long."

They discussed going into town, and all agreed that it had to be done. If they got gas, bullets, a gun, or even some more provisions, the trip would be worth making. That, and Hinton was already in the right direction. They packed up after lunch and made off toward the coal mining town.

* * *

"So I guess it's me that has to ask you, Deek," said Paul out of the blue as they trudged along. "What the fuck did that lady say to you?"

Deacon slowed down and stopped, he glanced back at Paul and sighed. There was a quiet pause.

"Was she trying to get your phone number?" asked Scott.

"I wish that was it," answered Deacon. Jen and Liv, both as interested as Paul, stopped to listen as Deacon struggled for an answer. "Look, she's an old woman, she's been cooped up in the cabin for who knows how long, and the mist does things to people....Honestly...I'm still trying to process it, it's probably nonsense. Sorry, I'm not ready to talk about it yet."

Paul shrugged and carried on. The group followed.

"Told you it was a phone number," said Scott.

* * *

After a solid day of marching, they found their way onto the four lanes of the Yellowhead Highway. They were only three kilometers out of Hinton, and decided to walk toward the outskirts of the town where they planned to spend the night. The highway was still in relatively good repair, with only the occasional abandoned car making the road seem in any way out of the ordinary. They checked each vehicle they came across that appeared drivable, but every one was already stripped of its valuable components. Occasionally they came across a vehicle with a body inside. It amazed Paul how many times on their travels that they found robbed or disturbed bodies. It was not uncommon to come across corpses missing fingers for rings, or missing shoes, or even clothing. When their travels first began they took the time to bury all of the bodies that they came across. They were fewer and farther between then, and it was now a futile effort. They would not get far if they had to dig a hole and erect a cross every time they found a body. When they came across a child though, it was a different story. Jen would insist they bury the body, and she did this again when they found a small child still in a car seat in an old bronze Toyota. Deacon was furious with her, as he usually became when she would insist on these burials, but she refused to carry on until the job was done.

"It's easy for you to be all high and mighty when you don't have to dig the hole, or smell the stink, or touch the body," Deacon complained.

"Just shut up and do it," Jen replied coldly.

After the hasty burial, they made their way to within a kilometer of Hinton, and then headed into the surrounding forest to make camp. They put up their tents, made a fire pit and set up camp as they had done so many times before. The girls had made a good effort of sewing and duct taping the damaged tent while at the Williams's, and although it wasn't pretty, it remained as dry and comfortable as it had always been, which was not saying much.

"So, what are we gonna do when we get into Hinton tomorrow?" Scott asked, as they sat around their fire, watching stars.

"Simple: we swap that bottle of rum for a couple of loaded M16s and a nice Cadillac Escalade. Leather. Air. Auto. Tilt. It's gotta be fully loaded, or it's no deal," answered Deacon. He would at times try to keep up with Scott's banter, though usually with far less success.

"It's worth a try," said Liv. She'd been quiet most of the night and they hardly noticed her. "If we're gonna find a car, I can't think of anywhere better than Hinton. There aren't any Buicks out in the forest."

"We'll find this guy's house and then try to see what we can get for that bottle," said Paul. "I'm off to bed. Get your sleep, you may need it tomorrow."

* * *

Deacon awoke suddenly. Did he hear a noise, or had it just been a dream? He looked at Jen beside him and watched her slowly breathe. It was morning, or very close, as the light already penetrated the thin nylon of the tent. He quietly picked up his sweater and the shotgun, and slowly undid the zipper around the door. Something outside heard the zipping and ran off. Deacon quickly jumped out of the tent and went to inspect. A dark shape ran off into the distance. It *looked* human.

"Wes, wake up! A thief!" Deacon yelled at Wes's slouched body sleeping beside the now dead

fire. Wes woke with a start and jumped to attention. "Chase him, Wes, he's stolen something! I gotta put on my pants…go! Go, for Chrisakes!"

* * *

Wes suddenly found himself off and running through the cold misty morning. It took him a moment to get his wits, but in the last year he became used to abrupt awakenings. Rifle in hand, he was off in the direction that Deacon pointed. He could see the shape that he followed. It looked like a small man with a brown pullover. The man had a strong lead, but while in school Wes had taken track, and the months of travel left him in superior shape. There were many situations he'd had to run at a full sprint in last months and he was already starting to close in on his prey.

"I'm behind you, Wes, keep goin', we're catching up!" yelled Paul, sprinting a short distance behind him. It never took Paul long to emerge from his tent. He slept clothed, and with his shoes on, since the late night attack last week.

The chase stretched out as they fought through the growth of the forest. Branches scratched Wes's face as he ran through the trees. It was difficult terrain for running as the ground was covered with old roots, deadfall, slippery moss and all kinds of mysterious fungus and lichen. He tore through cobwebs and pulled the sticky things from his eyes as he ran. The sun rose above the silhouettes of the surrounding hills and there was a thick morning mist hanging around the trees. Wes knew that the strange mists that came from the portals were not a good thing to be in for too long. It was a fact that they all learned over the last year. The mist and trees caused Wes to lose sight of his prey and he stopped and listened to the crashing ahead of him in the forest to pick up his target. Wes turned and stared at an old knot in a large birch tree. What he saw made his eyes widen into saucers. He blinked and forced himself to continue his pursuit.

What am I gonna do when I catch this guy? wondered Wes. He was not a particularly good

fighter. In the school and bar fights of his day, he always took the worst of it, or did his best to avoid confrontation entirely. Was he going to have to shoot him? Wes had never shot a person before. He didn't know if he could.

Wes heard a short yelp of pain in front of him and found his thief sprawled out on the ground. He turned out to be a she, a skinny little girl in ratty clothes. Wes could see she'd stepped on a large rotten log only to have it break under her weight. Scores of ants that called the log home swarmed to defend it. The girl sat on the ground and stared up at him with terror in her eyes. Blood poured from a cut on her forehead. Wes could see that she'd twisted her ankle and had no hope of getting away. In her shaking hands was a short knife that she pointed and occasionally thrust in his direction. Wes pointed the rifle directly at her. "I don't think your butter knife is a match for this thing, do you?" Wes did his best to sound tough, but he could not hide the burning in his chest and his struggle for oxygen.

She looked up at him, dropped the knife, and began to cry. Wes could see that she had not only cut her head, but she had also badly skinned her leg. He reached down and grabbed the stolen bag. It was Liv's. She was probably up at camp right now realizing her precious makeup and magazines were gone. "Out of all the stuff you could have taken, you chose makeup and underwear?" Wes asked her.

Wes called out to the other guys off in the forest, "I'm over here and everything's okay, I've captured our thief."

The girl stopped crying and backed herself against a tree. Paul arrived first, followed quickly by Deacon. The three of them stared at the young girl as they all took time to catch their breath. She was young and frail, no more than ninety pounds at best. Her dark hair was a mess and showed the early makings of dreadlocks. Her clothes were ragged and torn, apparently from well before her fall. She might have been a pretty little thing at one time, but now she looked tattered, dirty and homeless.

"What the hell are we going to do with her?" asked Paul first, speaking the question in all of their minds. Deacon still had not caught his breath, and sat down on the same log the young girl tripped over.

Wes stared at him dumbfounded. "Dude… Dude! You're sitting on a load of ants," said Wes, shocked that Deacon hadn't noticed. There were so many ants scrambling on the log, over and on top of each other, that the log looked like it was covered in softly undulating fur.

"Bah!" yelled Deacon as he quickly jumped up and slapped his legs and back. He hated bugs. "Jesus, I need to get back to camp and clear out my clothes. I think some got under my shirt."

"Well, what are we gonna do with *her*?" asked Paul again.

"I don't know, let's bring her back and let the others decide," said Wes.

"Christ, if we bring her back she's gonna become a pet project for the girls and we'll end up having another mouth to feed," said Deacon, still frantically swiping at his clothes.

"That's true," agreed Paul. "I guess that leaves us with only one choice then."

The girl peered up at them. There was a sudden panic in her eyes. "I'll…I'll let you have me if you let me go," she said. She was breathing quickly and could barely formulate her words.

They all stared at each other, wide eyed. Deacon's jaw dropped. Paul was the first to speak.

"No! No! No! Jesus, what do you think we are? How is a girl your age talking like that?" he demanded. It dawned on him that she thought from his earlier comment that they were going to kill her. Paul merely intended to let her go.

"We should take her back with us, I don't know what's been done to her, but maybe a little attention from the girls wouldn't be such a bad thing," said Wes.

The two others, still shocked, agreed.

"What's your name and where are you from?" Deacon sighed.

The girl gazed at the ground embarrassed, realizing the young men meant her no harm. "My name is Jessica. I'm from Hinton," she said quietly, avoiding eye contact.

"And do you have somewhere to go, Jessica from Hinton?" asked Deacon.

"I have somewhere to go, but I'm not going back," she replied.

"We can see that. At our camp we have a first aid kit and some nice girls you can talk to. You

should come with us," said Deacon, his voice sounding as if he were talking to a puppy.

"I'm fourteen, you know. I'm not a little girl," she said.

"Obviously," commented Wes under his breath.

"You can let us take you back to our camp and fix you up, or you can limp out of here and go back to wherever it is you came from. We don't have time for this, and I don't like leaving our companions without a weapon," said Paul.

The girl looked at them and nodded in agreement. She attempted to get up, but her leg was hurt more than she realized. After a quick inspection Paul didn't think her ankle was broken, but it was badly sprained. He felt awkward touching the girl after her earlier comments. There was no way she could walk on her own and if they left her out there in the middle of the forest, it would likely be a death sentence.

Wes carried Jessica back most of the way. Deacon took the rifle and Paul grabbed Liv's bag, leaving Wes with only the burden of the girl. Jessica said nothing and answered no more questions during the journey back.

Chapter 7 – Darwin

Wesley David – Entry # 7

Our group of seven members has grown by one, at least for the time being. Jessica Grainger: aged 14, brunette, four foot nothing, eighty five pounds, and as talkative as a houseplant. Her first words to me, Paul, and Deek were, "I will let you have your way with me if you let me go." We couldn't believe it, I still can't. If we thought Anna was a mess than this girl is a disaster. How she has managed to survive this long is beyond me, but the girls have taken to her so it looks like we have another mouth to feed. We have decided to stay in camp another night to allow Jessica's ankle to heal. I finished a bowl of meat stew from the Williams and have settled down for bed. What I wouldn't give to be sleeping under that warm roof again.

Something a little disturbing has begun happening again that I don't think we can ignore any longer. We're seeing things. I don't mean rampant hallucinations, but it has happened to all of us with the exception of Deacon. Today, when we were running through the forest after Jessica, I swear I saw a face in a tree. I know that it sounds crazy. I won't rule out hunger or adrenaline, or even my imagination, but I swear a face in that tree looked at me. I didn't feel fear exactly, it didn't look entirely evil or angry, it was a human face, as surprised to see me as I was it. I was about to call Deacon over during our chase when suddenly I realized that it was just a knot. It was creepy, but the mist has done it to us before.

When the portals first opened on April 11th and the days following, there was a strange mist everywhere. It wasn't thick by any means, you could easily drive a car and you could still see the skyscrapers downtown, but it was like there was a wet smoke in the air, a distinguishable haze. The reports said there was something in it, chemicals and compounds that they had never seen, or even thought possible, and whatever it was, it made people see things and act strangely. I've taken some chemistry and I remember reading the elements they found in the air had strange sub-atomic qualities, things like weird valance counts, unbalanced bonds, and other stuff that made me wish I studied

harder in chem class. Basically, scientists said that it did not follow "the rules", at least, not the set we have come to know and understand. I remember them showing a shot of a huge portal that opened above Paris on TV. It spewed out the mist like a massive smokestack.

I mention this because I noticed this haze again today. It cleared up after the first few days of the attacks, but every now and then you can sense it, and some days it's so thick that you can't help but notice it. It's the mist that makes you see things. A hallucination is one thing, but when two people, or more, see something together—what is it then? I think these visions may be why Anna has such a hard time getting herself together.

* * *

"Where are your parents? Your family?" asked Jen.

"Dead."

"Where do you live? Where is your home?"

"I have no home."

"Who takes care of you?"

"I do."

It was a sad story, but not uncommon. There were both many orphans and many childless parents out in the wide world. After great reluctance, she admitted she knew the address they sought and gave them what seemed incredibly detailed directions.

The girls insisted on staying in camp another night because of Jessica. Paul got into an ugly argument with Jen and Liv over the girl. He was angry they were showing so much hospitality to a thief, especially when they had so little food to spare. He didn't want a child companion on their journey. They were good points, but they had absolutely no effect on the girls.

"She's only a kid, Paul, and without our help she won't survive. Send her back out there alone and she's as good as dead, you know that. We don't turn our backs on children. We don't have to be

heroes, but we can't abandon an innocent little girl. The Williams didn't turn their backs on us," argued Jen.

"*Yeah, innocent,*" commented Paul sarcastically under his breath.

"Yes, *innocent*, Paul. Maybe she's been through a lot, but so have we. I can think back to a few situations that make you a little less than innocent, too. She's coming with us. I'll be responsible for her." Jen was angry and using a tone she usually reserved for Deacon.

"Fine, but she's already holding us up, and she can barely walk, it could take weeks for her to get better. In case you hadn't noticed from the chill in the air this morning, fall is coming fast, and we can't afford any more delays," replied Paul. He was not going to take this from Jen. She wasn't *his* girlfriend, or his mother.

"The mist is thick today, I don't know if it is the best day to go to Hinton anyway, man, maybe we can kick it here for the day and go early tomorrow," suggested Deacon, doing his best to defend his girlfriend while still trying to agree with Paul.

"Fine, whatever," said Paul, frustrated.

They stayed another day in camp, and little was accomplished. Wes did not want to venture into the forest with the haze so thick, and Scott simply refused. Deacon and Paul gathered firewood together while the girls rested and babied Jessica. The day and night passed by in the mist with little incident besides an old man that Liv and Jen claimed to see. Paul and Deacon searched the area where they saw him but found nothing.

* * *

Paul was serious about departing early the next day. He awoke at four in the morning for his guard duty and had everyone else up by five thirty. He carried a wristwatch, and he ran the group by it religiously. It wasn't like time mattered anymore but they still planned their daily routines by his

watch, and they were up at least an hour earlier than usual. Most of them were too tired to even complain. They packed up camp, loaded up their supplies and made a beeline for the town of Hinton.

Deacon and Scott took turns piggy-backing Jessica because she could barely walk on her ankle. Paul did not offer, nor was he asked, to do anything to accommodate her. The mist was still thick but they had travelled through it before. They made their way out of the forest and onto the side of the Yellowhead Highway that lead directly into Hinton. It wasn't long until they had made their way across an overpass, past a few abandoned hotels, and into the outskirts of the town.

The members of the group were uneasy as they walked toward Hinton. When they left Edmonton the city was a very dangerous place. Desperate people became as much of a danger as the creatures, at least during the day. As they walked through the outskirts they saw little action, no movement, no cars, nothing. It was disquieting.

The city was spread out, with much of it and its businesses right on the highway enticing travelers and shoppers. The real heart of the city was down in a valley below the highway where the lifeblood of the town had once been, a huge pulp and paper complex. Paul wondered how long it would take to get back to normal, even if all of the creatures could somehow disappear. But nothing would ever be the same.

"Paul, look!" said Deacon abruptly.

Across a parking lot a large hotel complex stood a short distance from the highway. It still had new shingles on the roof and was only a few years old. The hotel was built to house the increasing tourist traffic headed to Jasper National Park and beyond. Many of its windows were smashed out. Paul carefully considered the complex and it took him a moment to realize what Deacon was talking about. In a window on the second floor was the undeniable shape of a Fang.

"Oh shit, can everyone see that?" asked Paul. Scott and Wes both replied they could, and that was enough for him, he knew it wasn't the mist playing with his head.

Encountering a Fang was an entirely different situation from encountering a Creeper. While usually smaller than Creepers, Fangs were equally, if not more, dangerous. They were hardier, far more difficult to kill, and they were always found in packs. The Fang was named for its defining feature, a long, razor sharp tooth, more accurately a proboscis, that protruded from the bottom of its jaw. The Fang, like most of the creatures that came out of the portals, was bipedal, but unlike most of the creatures, they ran like apes using their hands for balance.

"It sees us, man…oh Jesus," said Wes from behind Paul.

"Do we run or stand our ground?" asked Deacon.

"There are eight of us here. Make Jessica stand upright because if they see she's injured they might try to go for her. I say we just slowly keep walking. If they start to approach I'll fire a shot to let them know we're armed," responded Paul. He did his best to hide the sound of terror in his voice.

The shape in the window disappeared and a loud screech came out of the hotel.

"Oh no! There are at least three now, Paul," said Liv. They all knew and trusted her good eyesight. Apparently, other Fangs had awakened to join in the hunt.

They walked at a steady pace away from the hotel. Four of the creatures now emerged from inside and gathered in the parking lot. They watched the group walking briskly away. They grunted and wheezed, and occasionally knocked their protruding stingers against each other creating a terrible noise that sounded like finger nails against a chalkboard.

"I think they're staying!" said Liv as they continued to walk away. A group of eight humans was a significant challenge. These monsters learned early that humans had fight in them, and deadly weapons. Throughout the first months of the crisis millions of assorted creatures were killed, along with millions of soldiers posted to guard the portals that opened up across the world. The more advanced military forces butchered at least ten for every man lost, but the beasts continued to pour through.

Paul looked at the four creatures gathered in front of the hotel. What he then saw gave him a

sick burst of adrenaline. Six more of the creatures poured out of the front door to join the pack.

The hunt was on.

"Oh, my God," said Liv, as she too watched the additional creatures emerge.

"Okay, we run now!" yelled Paul. The entire group took off instantly. The seven of them were in excellent shape. After months of marching and escaping from many dangerous situations they could run for long periods of time. They had a good lead and might have stood a chance of out running them, but for the weight of Jessica piggy-backing on Deacon. She was light, but the extra weight and awkwardness were significantly slowing Deacon down. He ran with all his might and was going faster than any of the others could have under the circumstances, but still not fast enough, and they all knew he could not keep it up. They could hear the high pitched howls of the pack behind them. Closing.

"Drop her, Deek...fuck it, man…it's her or us!" yelled Paul.

"I…I can't do that…I can't," stammered Deacon between breaths.

"Fire a shot at them, Paul! Maybe they'll stop!" screamed Wes.

It was a good idea, especially if he could hit one. Often times the creatures would resort to cannibalism.

Paul stopped, turned and lifted his rifle. Deacon came thundering by with the young girl on his back along with Jen who was desperately trying to help him. The creatures were gaining, and were faster than Paul expected. He realized that they could likely catch up to them even if Deacon wasn't burdened. Paul lifted his sight and aimed at the leader. Blood pumped furiously through his veins. His hands and arms shook uncontrollably. He held his breath and fired.

The blast echoed down between the towering trees that lined each side of the highway. Paul saw pieces of hot asphalt pop up into the air. A miss.

"Shit!" yelled Paul as he turned and ran. It was a difficult shot. What he saw behind him was not good. The gunshot startled the creatures, and stopped them momentarily, but the leader of their pack was an exceptionally large and cruel beast. Paul knew they were in grave danger. He counted at

least fifteen, and that was only what he could see in a rushed glance.

It did not take long for Paul to catch up to Deacon after firing his round.

"Deacon, you have to drop her!" gasped Paul as he ran along side. The moans and screams of the pack sounded behind them. Closer.

"I can't!" Deacon shouted as he felt Jessica's arms tighten even more around him. Her jagged fingernails were digging into his chest. Deacon could feel her heartbeat on his back, pounding away.

"They're going to catch you, man! There are too many!" pleaded Paul.

"Deacon, you have to drop her!" agreed Jen. The beasts were only fifty feet away now, and closing, and Deacon was already beginning to show signs of slowing from weariness.

Deacon quickly turned and looked behind him. He could only see some of the pack behind Jessica's body, and it was clear that there was too many to fight.

Ahead of them Scott turned and aimed the shotgun while Wes nocked an arrow into his bow. The shotgun blasted as Deacon passed. One Fang took some of it and slowed down, but the rest of the pack continued unabated. Wes tried to let loose an arrow, but it bounced on the asphalt in front of him and he yelped with pain as the bowstring struck his forearm. Wes's archery was even worse under pressure.

Scott and Wes, unencumbered, overtook Deacon quickly after their shots. The creatures were only forty feet away now. Paul could hear the flesh of their rough hands smacking on the pavement behind him.

Paul glanced ahead. There was nothing at all for at least a kilometer. In the distance was a gas station sign and the beginnings of the main town. They would never make it at this pace. They would be doomed if they chose to fight. Had the numbers been even, they still would not have put up much resistance with only two firearms. Paul looked across at Deacon. He could see that he let go of Jessica's legs. Paul knew Deacon fully understood the danger: his own life was at stake for a young

girl they only met a day earlier. Jen was running beside him with her hands on Jessica's fingers, desperately trying to pry them from Deacon's chest. Jessica hung on with determination and strength unlike that of a girl of her age and size. She would not let go, and did not want to die alone. She was going to bring Deacon down with her.

They could hear the creatures breathing now. The chase had only been on for a few minutes but it felt to Paul, and to his lungs, like they had been running for hours. He could only imagine what Deacon's lungs felt like. The creatures spread out to each side of them. They would soon be surrounded.

Paul would remember this moment for the rest of his life. The words *survival of the fittest* kept running over and over in his mind.

"Jen, run ahead!" yelled Paul. She looked at him with terror through her teary eyes.

"Jesus, Jen! There's no time! Believe me, I'll take care of this!" Paul exclaimed and he gave her a nod. She let go of Deacon and ran ahead. Her desperate attempts to free Deacon of the girl were actually slowing them down and Deacon's pace increased once he saw Jen running ahead of him. He held no grip on the young girl at all now. She clung to his large frame with her arms around his neck. Her fingers dug deep into his chest and her legs wrapped tightly around his stomach. Deacon wanted her off, but he couldn't do it. It wasn't in his nature.

But it was in Paul's.

They were now surrounded by the creatures. Paul looked to his left and saw one beside him. It snarled with delight.

"Paul!" screamed Deacon.

There was no choice of action left. Paul reached behind Deacon and grabbed a fistful of Jessica's ratty hair and pulled with all his might. She let out a scream as she fell off him backwards with shreds of his shirt still in her hands. She bounced on the pavement hard.

So did Deacon.

"Get up!" shouted Paul as he stopped to help Deacon. Blood poured from Deacon's forehead and his face and hands were covered with road burn from the fall.

Jessica never even had a chance to scream. She stumbled to get up on her injured ankle and fell again. The creatures pounced. She collapsed like a house of cards.

Deacon got up and gained his composure quickly. Together, he and Paul ran at a furious rate. Deacon was now free to run full tilt and to him it was like swinging a bat after the weights were removed. Their legs pumped as they sprinted with all the strength of their youth, fueled by the certain death behind them. Two of the creatures followed them for a short distance, but a ready meal behind them convinced them to turn back.

Deacon and Paul managed to catch up to the group in a few minutes and they slowed down when they were convinced the chase was over. Surprisingly, Anna was the farthest ahead, outrunning both Scott and Wes. They stopped jogging only when the scrum of creatures was well behind them and out of sight. Deacon was in bad shape, his green t-shirt torn and drenched in blood and sweat.

The seven did not speak at all as they found their way deeper into the town. They kept a steady pace, trying to put distance between themselves and the scene on the highway. They passed row after row of mostly abandoned homes. Occasionally, they could see an eye or a head poke out from behind a boarded window. It wasn't long until they found a house nearby to where Jessica told them to bring the rum that looked as good of a place as any to rest. Paul and Wes quickly checked it out and found it was messy, and infested with mice, but good enough for the night. They made their way into the basement and set up camp. Abandoned long ago, the house had a thick covering of dust piled up over the old coffee tables and chairs. The basement had the feel of a seventies rumpus room. Deacon laid down with a groan of pain on a huge red couch with tasseled throw pillows. The basement was dark, but well protected as the only entrance in was the stairwell. Unfortunately, it was also the only way out. It was in this basement they decided to make their stand for the night.

Occasionally, from outside, they thought they could hear the sound of flesh slapping on

pavement.

Chapter 8 – Madonna

Wesley David – Entry # 8

It's around midnight, late August or early September. I'm sitting on an old rocking chair in the basement of an abandoned home of what was once the small city of Hinton. We had an awful day, an absolutely awful day. Jessica Grainger is dead, used as a sacrifice to distract a group of Fangs we came across while entering town. I don't know how to feel, or what to feel, or if I even should. Deacon is injured, but he should be OK. He did his best to save her, I guess we could have done more, myself included. But I can't help but think...but know...that if we stayed and fought, I would not be writing this right now.

I thought writing in a journal again would be helpful for me. I don't feel it's helping, mostly it's killing time. It's amazing how much time I have now: no TV, laptop, smartphone, apps, Netflix, sports, books, going out for dinner, pool, games, plays, work, or school. Nothing but my thoughts and this shitty little notebook. I don't want to write about what happened today. I don't want to write about what happened to Ryan. I don't want to write about my family, or about God, or about life. No one is ever going to read this. Why bother? Why? Why? Why?

Tomorrow we will head into town to trade our precious bottle of rum. It's ridiculous, we should drink it now and save ourselves the disappointment. I wonder when it's gonna be me that's being torn apart by a pack of hungry beasts. Tonight? Tomorrow? Next week?

Poor Deek. Poor, poor Deek.

* * *

Anna was glad that it wasn't her today. She had gone through many days when she thought it would be. She had lost so much, but this still hurt. She realized that she had cared for the girl. She saw, and somehow felt, the abuse and neglect Jessica endured. She admired the young girl for fighting

through it. But why care about someone when you were going to lose them anyway? Anna fell asleep in a small armchair with tears in her eyes.

* * *

Paul told himself that he felt no guilt. To him, tearing Jessica from Deacon's back was purely an act of self defense. Paul played the scenario over and over in his head about what he could have done differently. If they ran instantly, if they stayed off the highway, if they had never taken the girl in. Paul imagined himself in court having to defend his actions. The prosecution peppered him with accusations: "How could you do that to a little girl? You killed her! It was nothing less than pure murder! You're a coward!" He thought of how he would answer the questions: "What would *you* have done? What choice did I have? Should I have let them all die? I didn't ask for this!" The only problem with Paul's imaginary court scene was that they kept bringing up that it was his second offence. Paul got little sleep that night.

* * *

What a shitty day, thought Scott as he lay down on the cold basement floor in his sleeping bag. *I hope tomorrow's better.* Scott fell asleep quickly.

* * *

Deacon pitied the young girl. She was so lost, so abused, and so desperate to survive. He wondered how long he could survive on his own out in the forest, and how long he could mentally go on in a situation like that. Jen washed away the scrapes on his face, shoulders, and chest but they still

burned. Jessica's nails were long and the cuts on his chest were deep and jagged. *I can't believe we let her die,* thought Deacon. *I always thought we were the good guys....We're no better than anyone out there. We're no better than the cops who stole from the grocery stores, or the people who killed their neighbours for food.* Deacon saw the group as a band of young people not just out to survive, but to maybe make things better. To help bring some sanity back to the world. Deacon fell into a troubled sleep to the soft sound of Jen sobbing beside him.

* * *

Jen cried. Her tears flowed and would not stop. The young girl reminded her of her little sister, Deana, in so many ways. The ragged little thing they found in the forest had been through so much. Jen could tell she was abused in one way or another from the distance in her eyes. Jessica met them, and she was abused again, and this time it cost her life. Sacrificed for Deacon. They killed that girl. Jen had to flip her pillow, soaked with the moisture from her tears. She fell asleep crying, praying for forgiveness.

* * *

Wes was exhausted, hungry, and in a horrible mood. He didn't want to talk to anyone, he just wanted the bliss of sleep. He found no bliss that night, as he had nightmares of Jessica Grainger's face in the knot of a large birch tree screaming and laughing at him.

* * *

Liv sat on an old rocking chair and held the rifle. It was her duty to put up the first night watch. She sat and thought about how much she would love a cigarette. To bring a fresh one to her lips and

light it. To breathe that first drag into her lungs and to feel her whole body relax with satisfaction. She would do anything for a cigarette. Anything. It was funny how she tried so hard to quit in the months prior to The Arrival. Now she was officially a non-smoker, but not by choice, by scarcity. Liv was alone with her thoughts for some time. *That poor girl....Poor Deek...he's such a great guy. He tried so hard to save her, I know he would do the same to save us. To save me.*

* * *

Paul opened his eyes. It was daylight. *They must have let me sleep through my shift.* Paul sat up and saw his companions around him sleeping. Deacon and Jen together on the old couch, Anna in a small armchair, and the boys on the floor. In the chair at the base of the stairway sat Liv, asleep with her arms around a loaded rifle. Paul walked over to Liv and lightly took it from her. He regarded the basement and recounted his companions. They were lucky. Paul put on his clothes and some of his gear, and tied up his hiking boots quietly.

It was the early part of the day when everything was silent and cold. Paul walked upstairs peacefully and wandered about the abandoned house. The home had seen its share of visitors in the last year. The house had been ransacked many times, likely by both man and beast, searching for anything of use. On the walls were the typical pictures of a middle class working family. Paintings of boats on the sea with a sunset, a mountain covered with forest, and a water colour of a flower. The furniture was strewn about and broken for the most part, cushions and curtains torn. It was a scene he had witnessed a million times before.

The kitchen of the house was small and equally dirty. The cupboards were raided long ago. In his rummaging Paul found some old vanilla flavoring, some salt, and baking powder. These were typical items found in many of the houses they would search. The only things they would find were often items with little or no caloric value. In his mind Paul imagined a typical morning in the house

years earlier, the father frying up one of his famous three egg omelets for the kids, the wife washing food from the face of a baby, the kids laughing at pancakes shaped in the first letter of their names. Paul could feel his stomach rumble at the thought. Hunger was never sated. He searched the cupboards and discovered knives and utensils.

Paul walked up to the second level of the house where he found three small bedrooms and a bathroom. The upstairs bathroom was typical, its mirror smashed to pieces and strewn about the ground, the water in the back of the toilet emptied, likely long ago bottled and stored. In the hallway there still hung framed photos of the family members who lived in this house. It was two boys, likely around five and seven, young enough to still be convinced to give a real smile for a photo. The mother and father was a young couple, probably making a living from the large mill at the base of town. There the family hung together, with their happiness forever frozen in time. Paul wondered if they were happy at the time, he wondered if the mother made them smile, if the father wanted to get the picture at all or if it had been a great big hassle. *Either way, they were happy,* thought Paul, *they just didn't know it.*

"Paul!" shouted a panicked voice from the basement.

The rest of the group awoke to a missing member, and a missing rifle.

"It's okay! I'm up here," replied Paul as he made his way back downstairs to his companions.

* * *

"Where have you been?" asked Liv as he came downstairs.

"Just exploring, Sleepy," teased Paul. Liv lowered her eyes, ashamed.

"Did you make us bacon and eggs?" asked Scott in a muffled voice with his face still pressed down on a couch cushion. He still had his morning voice, but Paul thought he must have slept well with a wisecrack so early.

"No, sorry, pal, we were fresh out. We do have some dried moose meat with a side of pickles, and maybe we can we even open up that tin of pumpkin pie filler if you behave yourself," replied Paul.

"*Yummy*," muttered Scott into his pillow.

"Did you find anything upstairs?" asked Wes.

"Naw, just the typical. The place has been cleaned out. I saw some nice picture frames and a shower curtain if you're interested," replied Paul. Personal hygiene was among the things they all missed the most. They would go days without showering or washing themselves. When the opportunity finally came it was usually in a frozen river and they would have to get in and get out quickly. It was common for all of them to smell unbearable at times. They always looked, and sporadically found, things like deodorant, tooth paste, and soap, but they seldom lasted long and were becoming harder to find.

They sat down and talked quietly as they ate breakfast. The preceding day was still fresh in their minds and there was a quiet discomfort among them. The usual jokes and sarcasm were a lot lighter than normal. Even Scott was keeping his mouth shut for the most part. It would take time. Time for them to get over the loss and move on to a semblance of normality. It took time when they lost Ryan, and it would take time with Jessica.

"So what now, campers?" asked Wes as he finished packing away his blanket and supplies. He got a few looks but no response. Everyone turned to Deacon still lying on the couch. He had not spoken or moved all morning. "Are you up for it today, Deek?" asked Wes.

"No. I'm not. Why don't you guys go see what you can get for that bottle," replied Deacon. He did not appear to have even woken up for the most part, and he did not touch any breakfast. He lay motionless on the old couch with his back to them.

"Really, Deek, are you sure? Remember what always happens in horror movies when you split up? You're as good as doomed, didn't the movies teach you anything?" teased Paul. His jokes had a

deeper meaning however; he did not want them to separate for any reason, and he'd used the example before.

"I'll take my chances down here, just leave me the shotgun," answered Deacon. He still hadn't even lifted his head.

"Well, I'm staying here with you then," said Jen with concern.

"So am I," said Liv, also sensing something wrong with Deacon. Jen did not think about Liv's sudden response until later that day.

"It seems I will have to go it alone then," sighed Paul. "Oh well, wish me luck, guys."

"Oh Jesus, no you don't," grumbled Scott as he stumbled out of bed and fought to put on his pants. His hair resembled an electrocution.

"Any other joiners?" asked Paul, amused by Scott's struggle.

"I'll go," said Anna quietly from her seat. Paul looked at her, surprised.

"Right on, Anna, that's my girl! Way to show team spirit!" Paul was glad she decided to come. "That leaves you, Wes, what's it gonna be, partner? You want to see what a bottle of rum can fetch these days?"

"I can't say I'm not curious," answered Wes. "But with Deacon out of action maybe I should stay and man the shotgun, huh?"

"Yes, I suppose that's true, but I still think Deek's got a little fight left in him, isn't that right Deek?" Paul stared at Deacon's motionless frame on the couch and got no response. "Okay then…. We're off, the house is still a ways from here, so give us a couple of hours anyway. If we're not back by then, send in the cavalry." Paul somehow found a way to put the previous day's events behind him. He didn't know how or why, maybe he bottled it up somewhere, or maybe he didn't feel any guilt. Maybe he just never cared for the girl. Either way, Paul felt invigorated, and was ready to find them some means of transportation.

Scott grabbed the bottle of rum and his trusted knives. Anna put on her jacket and placed a

small knife in her belt, and the three of them left to see what they could fetch for a fine bottle of dark Caribbean rum.

* * *

A quick glance at the suburban street outside of their refuge showed little sign it wasn't an average summer day. They could see clouds of yellow pollen floating off the large spruce trees that stood in front of the many houses. Insects and mosquitoes buzzed about their faces and birds chirped. Properly parked cars lined the streets one after another. But with a closer inspection not all was as it should have been. A light standard lay across the street a few blocks down. The lawns of the homes lay riddled with gnarled dandelions and seeded grass so long it had become golden hay. Many homes either had boarded windows or broken glass, and some showed signs of disrepair with busted eaves or missing shingles. Besides that, only empty silence surrounded them. The sounds of humanity were gone.

"It looks safe, anyway," said Paul. He and Anna also took a moment to look about after leaving the front entrance. "Do you guys remember what Jessica said about the address?"

"Yeah, I do," said Anna. "We need to go ten blocks north to get into the 'M' crescents. What is that address we're supposed to go to again?"

"12 Madonna Crescent," said Paul. Both he and Anna turned to Scott with expectation.

"What? Too early for jokes?" asked Paul.

"Too easy," replied Scott.

"Well, there's no time like the present," said Paul. "Stay quiet and follow my lead. I'm sure we'll get there no problem, but if we come across trouble, we run, simple as that. If we split up, which we won't under any circumstances, we meet back at this house, 14 Foxboro, got it?"

"Yes, Colonel," said Scott still too tired to say it with enthusiasm. Anna looked at Paul and

gave a sturdy nod.

They made their way down the steps and toward their destination, walking slowly down the sidewalks and carefully eyeing the homes they passed. Some of the houses that remained occupied were turned into small fortresses. Windows were covered with metal flashings, the upper balconies of some houses were sandbagged. Chicken wire and fences also surrounded many homes. Unfortunately, there were also many burned to the ground, a strategy many of the creatures used to flush out their prey. Sometimes four or five homes in a row were destroyed. On their journey to Madonna Crescent they came across a few people. On one well-defended home three boys sat on the roof in the sun, armed with rifles. Only two of them waved back to Paul. The third, and oldest, stared at them, motionless in the morning sun. They came across an old man who was also standing on his balcony with a rifle in his hand. His only response to Paul's wave was a stiff nod.

It did not take them long to find the place they were looking for. 12 Madonna Crescent was clearly a place of importance in the town. As they approached they could see people standing in a line outside the front door, each carrying some kind of commodity. Paul saw a large deer carcass slung over a man's back, others carried big bags of flour or vegetables. The house itself looked like an armored truck. Sheet metal surrounded the outside and the area around it was cleared of obstructions. A large chain link fence, complete with razor wire, stood menacingly around the home. The first running vehicle Paul saw in months sat outside of the home, an army transport. Three military personnel sat in it while one stood talking to a guard at the front gate. On the roof sat four men armed with machine guns and peering through binoculars.

"Wow. This is not what I was expecting," said Paul as he watched the scene unfold in front of him.

"Nor I, man. This looks like something out of a movie," said Scott.

"The wheels of commerce must continue, I suppose. I don't like those military guys though, I've heard they take ammo from travelers. Be careful," said Paul to the two of them.

They slowly approached the house and made their way into the line that formed outside of the massive home. The people around them seemed anxious. Scott tried to start a conversation with a tall man in front of him with the deer carcass on his shoulder by making a joke about Bambi. The man didn't appreciate it and did his best to ignore Scott.

A shrill yell came from a man on the roof. "You, red jacket!" shouted the man directly to Paul. "What do you have?"

Paul lifted his small bag with the bottle up in the air. "It's a special delivery for George Wilson."

"Okay," replied the man on the roof and continued before Paul could even breathe a sigh of relief.

"You, hair boy," said the man to Scott. "What do you have?"

"Me? I…I ain't got nuthin', I'm here with him."

"Get out of the line. No trade, no entry," said the man sternly. He looked like a nightclub bouncer, and it sounded like he spoke the same words a thousand times before.

Scott wasn't even given the chance to debate before the man spoke again.

"You, skinny, do you have something, or are you providing a service?" asked the man, leering at Anna.

"I'm here with him, too. A service? What do you mean?" asked Anna.

"Get out of the line, girl. If you don't know the answer to that question than yer no good to us." A few of the men on the roof and in the lineup laughed.

Scott and Anna looked at each other.

"It's okay, guys, wait on the lawn, you should be safe with this many people around. Besides, you've got nothing of value for anyone to take," said Paul loudly to them.

Scott and Anna made their way out of the line and sat down on the far end of the front lawn. Scott said prudishly, "I think he meant *sex,* Anna."

"I know, *Einstein*," replied Anna.

"Well! Well! Someone's feeling a little frisky today, aren't they!" replied Scott. "Are you sure you're not up to providing some services for these guys? We could use some flour, or a pound of deer meat."

"Oh, be quiet, Scott. Can we please just drop it?" asked Anna.

"Sure. But maybe you can provide *me* some services? I've got a nice can of pumpkin pie back at camp, what kind of services will *that* get me?" continued Scott.

Anna sat and listened to Scott for the entire time Paul was inside. Scott was now wide awake, and right in his element.

* * *

Paul stood in line for a long time. He thought back to where he used to stand in line: at the bank, at a nightclub, at a restaurant. It was a long time since he had to wait for something like this and his patience had only grown thinner. He attempted to get into conversations with the men around him, hoping that showing a little more tact than Scott might work, but none of the men would take the bait. He hoped to get answers on what he would find inside, but they only gave short replies, or a cold look.

The man in front of him with the large deer carcass walked out of the house with nothing but a large smile on face. Paul couldn't resist. "What did you get for that deer, man?" The older man surveyed Paul and opened up his hand: cupped inside were ten cigarettes. Paul looked at him and shook his head; he never understood smokers.

"We don't have all day, kid, go on in," said the man watching the door. Paul passed through the chain link fence into the yard and approached the house. Stepping inside was like taking a journey back in time. The house interior was clean and in good order, if a bit full. The smell of food, cigarettes, and exhaust wafted throughout. Somewhere in the basement a generator was humming.

Paul stared at the lights powered by it with delight. Somewhere from a room above Paul could hear a stereo playing. He couldn't quite place the music, but it sounded like CCR.

Sitting in front of him on a huge plush couch was a very fat and very sweaty man. He wore large camouflage pants with an even larger fishing vest. A baseball cap that said POLICE in large white stitched lettering sat crooked on his head with the stains of sweat ringing it like the inside of a tree trunk. In front of him was a pack of cigarettes, what resembled a plate of chicken bones, and a large cup of mystery fluid. His high pitched voice contrasted sharply with his tremendous size.

"Well, yer new, aren't ya? It's always good to see new clientele. Whadaya have to offer?" asked the fat man.

Paul answered with his own question. "Are you George Wilson?"

"I am he. The one and only, fulfilling the needs and the desires of everyone in this two horse town—for a price," answered the fat man without hesitation and he laughed with an almost pig-like squeal.

"I was sent here by Ted Williams. He said you had access to many things, and that you might be able to help us out," said Paul.

"Oh, he did? Well, if *Ted Williams* said I would help you out, then that's all I need to hear. I tell you what, you back yourself up to the front door and I will get the boys to start packing whatever it is you want…just say 'when' when yer satisfied." The fat man erupted into squeals of laughter along with a large man that stood behind him in the room. He appeared to be the fat man's personal guard, and carried a pistol in his belt.

Paul stood there alone in the room feeling like an idiot. He was speechless.

"Listen, kid," said the fat man after gathering his composure. "I've met a lot of the people who lived in this town, and if I did a favour for every one of them I would have nothing left, never mind if I even did a favour for everyone I consider a friend, a small group, in which Ted Williams is not included. I gave up doing favors on April 11th, boy, and it's the only reason I'm still around, isn't that

right, Jimmy?"

"That's right, Mr. Wilson," answered the muscular young guard.

"Times are tough, kid," continued the fat man. "It's not my fault, and I ain't no nun, so if you don't have somethin' to exchange, git out. I could give a fiddler's fuck who you know, or who sent you." The fat man again erupted in squeals.

This guy is like Jabba the Hut or something, thought Paul with disgust. "Listen, I did come here to trade, and since I'm new to your system you can't blame me for dropping a name to try to get a better deal."

The fat man lifted his eyes. "Hmm…an honest reply, I think I might like this kid. What do you think of him, Jimmy boy?"

"I think he's *just great*," answered the muscleman in a monotone voice.

"Of course you do, Jimmy. So tell me what's in that little bag of yers you'd like to deal. I'm *dying* of anticipation here." Again the fat man squealed with delight at himself.

Paul reached into the bag and pulled out the bottle of rum and set it on the table.

"Ohhh, a man of my own tastes!" *Squeal.* He picked up the bottle and inspected the seal at the top. "And I see it's unspoiled! Very good, boy. Very, very good. He's done well, hasn't he, Jimmy?"

"Yes, Mr. Wilson, very well, sir, very well," answered the muscleman.

"Now should we trade something for this bottle or just kill him and take his goodies?" squealed the fat man. Paul's eyes widened into saucers. "Look at his face! Ahh, I'm just kidding, boy! What kind of business would I be runnin' if I took everything that sashayed inside my door? I don't think I would get very much repeat business, do you?" The fat man enjoyed this one and cackled with delight.

"So what will it be, young man? Bullets? Toilet paper? Cigarettes? Or would you like a trip upstairs with one of our young lady friends?" Again the fat man squealed.

Paul realized that the man was drunk or high on something. Paul didn't like him and not because of his obvious gluttony and arrogance. He sensed something dark about him. The mist was in

the air again today and at times Paul thought he could see the shape and the colour of the fat man's face change and waver. Paul was clearly in danger here.

"I need gas, a full tank at least," answered Paul.

"Ah, fuel! Among the most precious of my commodities, although I'm getting fewer and fewer people asking for it lately. But where will you go, boy? Edmonton is far worse than it is here, and Calgary is a nightmare, too. North, south…it doesn't matter where, it's no better. Believe me. I get all sorts of travelers in here."

"Where I go is my business. I need gas and I need a lot," answered Paul, frustrated with the man and his disdain.

"I have handguns. What's say you trade for a pistol and say, eight bullets? Should help when the nasties come crawlin' into yer bunk-bed!"

"I have a rifle, but you're welcome to throw the ammo in with the gas," replied Paul coldly.

"What spunk he has! What a brave little Indian! You must have seen a thing or two in your travels. I can tell, the mist shows it on you." The fat man stopped laughing with his final comment.

"Alright, boy, I can get you a tank of gas, I have some connections with the military, and truth be told they have oceans of it, but I expect the jerry cans to be returned after you fill your vehicle. What are you driving?"

"At this point, nothing," answered Paul.

"Well, you better find yourself something quick. I'll give you one can to start with. If you can get something started, bring it back and we will fill 'er up. Deal?" said the fat man.

"And the gun?" asked Paul.

"Oh! You are a greedy little man. No gun, the fuel and that's it." The fat man smiled at Paul.

"It seems to me twenty six ounces of fine dark Caribbean rum won't be coming around very often in the future. I wonder what those military boys outside would give for it? You mentioned something about oceans?" asked Paul slyly.

Squeal! "You make me laugh, boy, but you're taking up too much of my time. You show them that bottle and they will confiscate it for the good of the Canadian Resistance! Good ol' Article 11! You don't think I'm stupid, do you, boy? Jimmy, do you think I'm stupid?"

"No, Mr. Wilson. You are certainly *not* stupid," replied the muscleman.

"I tell you what, I'll throw in a little surprise. My bitch had puppies and I just don't have the heart to toss them in a lake. A dog can be a good companion, wake you up at night when trouble's about, if you can keep it fed until it's an adult. They can always provide a good meal too, when times get desperate, or so I've heard!" *Squeal!* "What do you think boy, take it or leave it?"

Paul had no choice, he realized that one way or another he was not going to walk out with the rum in his hand, even if he wanted to. It wasn't a negotiation so much as an auction with only one bidder. Paul didn't know how a dog would work out. It would be a dangerous thing while it was young, making noise and eating precious food. The advantages were also clear when, and if, it ever became an adult—a strong companion and a guardian with a keen sense of hearing. The fact that Paul would be a hero to the group also crossed his mind.

"You, sir, have got yourself a deal," said Paul.

"Oh, delicious, I will treasure your rum, little boy," answered the fat man, licking his thick red lips. "Jimmy, get this boy a tank and a pup. Not the one with the black stripe though." The fat man's eyes returned to Paul. "Male or female?" he asked with a strange note in his already high voice.

It took a moment for Paul to understand the question. "Female."

"Interesting. But good, 'cause that's all we have left!" the fat man again squealed with delight.

Well, why the hell did you ask me then, asshole? thought Paul.

Jimmy left into the depths of the house to retrieve the goods. Paul was left standing there uncomfortably, staring around the home while the fat man eyed him. Suddenly, the front door opened.

"Everything okay in here, boss, it's been a while," asked the front door guard.

"Fuck off, Sammy, everything's fine. We have a grade A negotiator here trading something I

want. You may go." George Wilson lifted his large round fingers and whisked the guard away, who gave Paul a cold stare before closing the door. Paul and the fat man returned to quietly regarding each other.

"Well, this is an uncomfortable silence, isn't it? So tell me, now that you and I are old friends, where are you really off to?" asked the fat man as he lifted his glass from the table and drank. Paul could smell the alcohol in it, likely some kind of a home brew.

"I think we're gonna make a go for the coast, toward some warmer climates," answered Paul.

"A good strong boy like you? Nonsense! If you stick around here, and keep bringing me treasures like this, I can see to it that you will survive, boy, you might even be able to earn a little enjoyment now and then. Fuel and food is not all I trade in, you know," the fat man smiled.

"Yeah, I gathered…but we haven't had much luck staying in one place, so I'll think I'll take my chances on the road," answered Paul.

"Yes, yes, another little band of nomads. You have no idea how many I come across. Many come in here offering gold watches or diamonds, even cash, like that shit still has value. The truth about the nomad life is that you're gonna run out of unplucked gems, my boy. There are only so many untouched liquor cabinets and stocked cellars. They will run out on you, and if you can't hunt or farm, you will starve." The fat man was finally speaking with seriousness.

"We'll take our chances. I've got a good group of friends outside," Paul decided to throw that comment into the conversation. The fuel was taking an awfully long time. Another long silence ensued.

Jimmy finally returned with the goods. In one arm he held a ten gallon jerry can of gas and in the other, grasped by the skin of its neck, a large brown puppy. It looked to Paul like a chocolate lab.

"It's about goddamn time, Jimmy! Do you think I have nothing better to do than discuss the weather with this little shit? Jesus! Give 'em his stuff and let's keep moving," yelled the fat man.

"Sorry, Sir," said Jimmy who had red scratches up one arm. "The bitch didn't want to give her

up."

Jimmy literally tossed the puppy into Paul's arms. Paul tucked the trembling ball of fluff under his arm, picked up the jerry can and quickly exited without a goodbye as the fat man continued to complain to Jimmy in the background.

A long line had formed outside the house while Paul was dealing, and Scott and Anna were standing with a great deal of relief on their faces at the sight of Paul returning.

"Paul? Is that you?" asked Scott rubbing his eyes. "The years have been cruel."

"Yeah, no shit, man," answered Paul.

"Oh, my God, a puppy!" Anna's eyes lit up at the sight of it and she snatched it from Paul's arms. "I can't believe how cute it is!"

Scott was suitably impressed with Paul's dealings. "So what was it like inside, Paul?"

"Surreal, man… surreal."

Chapter 9 – Lucky

Wesley David – Entry # 9

I currently sit in the miserable hole that is 14 Foxboro Way. It's dark, it's dingy – and it's a perfect match for my mood. I wait here with only three of my seven companions; the other three have gone off to see what a bottle of rum is worth these days.

Once again I write to pass the time. The mist is here today, not nearly as bad as it can be, but there is still enough to notice it. It makes you feel like you're trapped in a dream. I won't call the situation we, and in fact the whole world, are in right now a nightmare. In nightmares there aren't sunny days, or a good laugh now and then. It's more like a strange dream, sometimes bearable, sometimes awful.

I used to spend weeks at a time without anything important to talk about. Sure, I had a few new things going on at work, or learned an interesting new fact at school, but nothing happened. Oh, the stories I could tell people now! We killed a young girl yesterday to save ourselves from a large pack of creatures! Or, my friends and I, while staying at some strange cabin in the wilderness, were attacked and almost killed by a group of long fingered monsters. It's ridiculous, but it's reality. I saw a face in a tree two days ago, and I have no doubt that I am completely sane. Or at least as sane as everyone else I'm with.

I used to be able to control my dreams. I would be having some terrible nightmare and I would say to myself, "This is too awful and it cannot be happening, it's a dream," and I would wake up. Unfortunately, it also worked the opposite way, I would be with some beautiful naked girl, or have won the lottery, and I would say to myself, "This is too good to be true..." and I would wake up. Let's just try it now.... See? I'm still here. I can't pinch myself hard enough. I can't wake up.

* * *

"Wake up!" said Wes as he sat on the front recliner with a notebook and shotgun sitting on his lap. Jen and Liv both looked at him quizzically, and then looked at each other with concern. Deacon didn't move.

"Wes, who exactly are you talking to?" asked Liv tentatively.

"Oh nothing….Never mind…I was getting a little too into my writing I guess," answered Wes, slightly embarrassed.

"Jesus," slipped Deacon's muffled voice from his pillow. "More comments like that and you're gonna have to give me the rifle and you lie down here."

Hearing Deacon speak again gave them all a sense of relief. He was tough and full of pride, and never before been one to bring the group down. Deacon lifted his head, cleaned the sleep out of his eyes, and gazed around the basement.

"How long have they been gone?" asked Deacon, having slept through most of the morning.

"Oh, they're going on over two hours now, I think, but Paul's the one with the watch," answered Wes.

"It's been at least two hours and I'm starting to get worried," said Liv who'd been awake since their departure. "I think maybe we should go check out that house for ourselves."

"Deacon's not up for that yet," said Jen.

"I'm good now. I'm sore and still tired but I've been worse, you guys know that," said Deacon trying his best to soothe Jen's concern. Truthfully he wasn't in any shape to go looking for them. His chest ached with the scratches from Jessica's fingernails. His hands burned as he tried to pull on his sweater. The road rash on his face was wet with puss and as he dragged the sweater across it he couldn't help but growl with pain. It was obvious to the rest of them Deacon was in no condition to play his role of protector.

"I think we need to give them more time," said Wes. "Maybe they got lost, maybe they got too much to carry for that bottle, hell, maybe they got eaten, but there's not much we can do about it now.

Paul may be an arrogant bastard at times but he's tough, and if I know him he's….What was that?" Wes pointed the shotgun toward to the stairway.

They heard a strange, high pitched yelp from upstairs. They also heard something loud thump on the floorboards above.

"I don't know, but Paul wouldn't make a noise like that…." Deacon burst out of bed and grabbed his axe, which was leaning against the nearby wall. The girls pulled their knives out and jumped behind the couch for cover.

Slowly the upstairs door opened and a shape emerged. Wes took aim.

Down the stairs ran a lanky brown puppy. Its short brown tail wagged and a large pink tongue drooped from one side of its mouth.

Stunned, Jen said, "It's a dog."

"We're back!" Paul's voice echoed down the stairway as he emerged with Anna and Scott behind him.

It was as joyous an occasion as they could remember. They were elated to see each other alive, and to see the furry, frantic puppy. Deacon was ecstatic when he was told they were successful in getting gas for the rum, while Paul was glad to see Deacon up and able to leave behind the previous day's events. With so much sorrow and tragedy in their lives, events like these were to be savoured, one small victory in what seemed like an eternity of defeats. They opened up one of their last cans of peaches and shared it as they played with the puppy and talked. Paul told them the story of his dealings with George Wilson.

"But Paul, you nearly got that dog killed sneaking it down the stairs like that," said Wes. His voice was jovial but he was serious.

"With your aim? I don't think so! Deacon was in more danger of getting hit than the dog, and he was behind you!" replied Paul, laughing. He joked away Wes's comment, but realized he hadn't considered that possibility. It could have been a far more downcast greeting.

"I'm naming the dog Lucky," said Wes. "Not because I didn't shoot it, but because I was the one with the shotgun and would have missed it anyway!" The group laughed, and the name stuck.

"We can't stay here too long, we've got to go find a car and take it back to that place to get it filled right up," said Paul after half an hour of talking and playing with the pup. "Besides, we shouldn't stay down here much longer."

"I like the sound of that!" said Scott with a big toothy smile.

The seven of them packed up their belongings and gear. Wes cut a leash for the dog from the roll of string they used to tie the tarps above their tents. It was still early in the day when they left the house, sunny for the most part, but some mist could still be seen high in the mountains.

"We're picking the right time to get out of here," said Paul to the group as they marched down the street. "It won't be long until it's too cold to be camping out in the forest. Hopefully we can get into the interior of B.C. before it gets too cold."

"Amen. I'm looking forward to some Pina Coladas when we hit the coast, mmm," said Liv.

"If we make it into B.C. we're not suddenly in the clear," said Jen. "It doesn't matter where we go, every place is going to have its own set of problems. I'm sure many other people are probably also heading there to get out of the coming cold. We could be looking at fewer confrontations with the creatures and more confrontations with bandits and gangs."

"It's a possibility," said Deacon, still limping from his injuries. "But I would rather face a hungry man than a minus forty degree night in a tent."

"I don't know, Deek," added Scott. "I think it depends how hungry."

* * *

They walked down the street toward Madonna Crescent, stopping to check each car they passed. They quickly realized choosing a vehicle was going to be difficult. Paul argued for cars with

only gas mileage on his mind. Wes said they needed something newer that wouldn't break down. Scott insisted they would need a four by four in case they came across roads that were blocked off, or a mountain snowstorm. Liv wanted something large enough that they wouldn't be sitting on top of one another. Deacon and Anna stayed quiet on the subject, Deacon too focused on his injuries and Anna leaving the decision to those who cared.

They finally came across a small truck. It was a green Ford Ranger with an open box. They stood by it and pondered.

"We could easily fit all of us and gear in the back of this thing, but what if it rains?" commented Jen.

"What if it snows?" added Scott.

Paul loved it. "We've got the tarp, and we can always take turns in the cab. I think it's perfect! It's pretty new, and looks like it's in good shape, and it's small so it should be good on gas. I think this is it."

Scott was not impressed. He was by far the most mechanically inclined of the group and he hated Fords. "Paul, you only like it 'cause you'll be in the front when it rains. I don't even think this is a four by four, and it's a Ford, we won't make it fifty feet! There's gotta be something else." Scott couldn't bear to think he would travel hundreds of kilometers through British Columbia in the back of a Ford. It was sacrilege.

"I drove a Ford, Scott, shut up!" said Liv. "It looks like a good little truck to me, I don't think one of your sports cars or monster trucks is what will suit our needs."

"It's not that. It's just, we can do better, right? We need something we won't freeze our asses off in, it gets pretty cold up in the mountain passes, you know. And what if we need protection, we can't all fit in the cab, right?" Scott was desperate as he realized the rest of the group was also beginning to agree with Paul.

Even Deacon couldn't help but grin, but he let Paul reply to the obvious. "Scott, I've seen a

Creeper punch through the side of house, never mind a car window. The only protection a vehicle can offer is speed. I don't think a windshield is gonna be much protection, except maybe from killer squirrels."

Scott lost the battle, and he was not happy. Like all of the other vehicles they came across, the gas cap on the little truck was removed and the tank completely siphoned out. The side window had been smashed long ago, likely in an effort to search the vehicle for anything of value. Scott saw the irony in trying to hotwire a vehicle he desperately didn't want to start. But still he did his best. They filled the gas tank with only a small amount of fuel in case something was wrong with the truck. They checked the battery and found it still had some juice, a lucky break as car batteries were often removed and used as a source of light. Scott couldn't find a way to hotwire the truck so he broke the steering column open with the butt of the rifle. Their luck seemed to be gaining momentum as they went to start the truck, but the engine just turned and turned and would not start. They tried again and again, but to no avail. Scott suspected water had found its way into the opening of the fuel tank. They looked over and checked the engine and other running parts as best they could, but even with Scott's knowledge of cars there was little they could do.

They wasted two hours trying to get the truck started. After giving up, Scott took the axe to the windshield to release his frustrations. "Goddamn Ford!" *Smash!* "Piece of shit!" *Smash!*

Paul stopped him, as he was attracting attention with the noise.

They carried on in their search for a vehicle as they continued toward Madonna Crescent. They searched hard but the vehicles they came across all seemed to be lacking in one way or another. A newer Corolla with two tires missing, an old Bronco with no battery, and an Impala with a smashed up windshield. They came across a Jeep, and after giving it a small amount of gas and a large amount of time, they found it wouldn't start. They wasted a gallon of gas and most of the afternoon trying to get something started and were getting ready to give up for the day when they saw it. A 1974 Lincoln Towncar. Whoever owned the massive vehicle had treated it well. Even after sitting untouched for

many months it appeared to be very good shape. The interior was still plush, and amazingly clean. A large pair of faded red fuzzy dice adorned the rear view mirror and the license plate on the back was a vanity with the word EMPIRE. The best part of the car was the fact that it was open and the keys were left right in the ignition so no hotwiring or steering column smashing would be required. The car had obviously run out of gas and been abandoned, but when they poured a small amount of fuel in the tank it fired up immediately. The engine purred.

"Oh man, this mother is going to guzzle that gas," commented Deacon.

"Yeah, it is," said Paul impatiently. "I think we all know that, but I'm starting to doubt our chances of finding anything else that's even gonna start today, and we're runnin' outta time. George Wilson might not even remember me if we don't get back there soon."

"A pimp wouldn't even drive this thing," said Scott.

"Even going slowly we'll never make it to the coast in this. It'll run out of gas by Banff, if it doesn't break down first," said Deacon.

"C'mon, Deek!" said Liv, giggling at the ridiculous car in front of them. "Where's your spirit of adventure?"

"Well, I…." Deacon couldn't finish his comment. He just liked it when she said his name.

* * *

They checked the car over, taking it back and forth down the block and found it ran well, so Paul and Scott filled it with the rest of the gas from the jerry can. In a way the car was ideal as it was large enough to seat all seven of them, along with a restless puppy, in relative comfort. Paul drove and beside him Jen and Deacon sat on the large front seat. In the back Liv and Scott sat against the windows with Anna and Wes sandwiched between them. It was an exciting moment for them. The sensation of moving in a vehicle was something they hadn't felt for a long time. The radio worked,

and so did the tape player, but no one was particularly interested in the two selections they found on the floor: Charlie Daniel's "Fiddle Magic", and "Smoke on the Water" by Purple Haze.

On their short trip to Madonna Crescent they found only two stations playing on the radio. One was a message from the Canadian Government that played in a continuous loop stating the government was still in operation and that the laws and rights of the Canadian people still stood strong. Paul laughed out loud after hearing the recording. The station was likely run out of a nearby army base, one of the only places with power. The second station was a strange mix of religion and prophecy by an emphatic preacher.

"*Jesus, Mohammed, and Buddha have left the building, folks, and moved onto greener pastures! Only you and I are left here now! And likely not for long! Who will we turn to? Who will save us from this madness of starvation and terror! Where is Jesus? Where is our holy son? Why has he not come for his flock? Because he has abandoned us! Only God Himself has chosen to stand by humanity in its time of need, God and His new Prophet, Isack! His adopted son! Isack! We have seen His miracles! Isack! He has healed the sick! Isack! He has turned water to wine, He has brought calm to our world of storms! Isack! He fights the beasts and creatures of our nightmares with strokes of lightning and flame! He brings even the beasts to His heel and commands them as God! Isack! His power is matched only by His benevolence! Come to Utah! To Isack! To Salt Lake City, Utah where our only hope of redemption lies. Come to us. To Isack! ……...Jesus, Mohammed, and Buddha have left the building, folks, and moved onto greener pastures! Only you and I...*"

This signal was also played in loops and they had no idea where it came from. Every one of them had heard of this Isack before. In the months after The Arrival, when the power would return for a few days and newscasts would resume, they would show pictures of the man and tell stories of the miracles he could perform. Paul had never bought into it or the "miracles". To Paul, they looked like bad Hollywood special effects. But he had met many people who left for Utah and many more who intended to. No one in their little group bought into those lies, except maybe Jen.

"I'd actually rather listen to the fiddle tape than this load of garbage," said Wes from the back.

"At least it's offering some kind of hope," said Jen, so quietly the passengers in the back didn't hear.

Paul shut down the radio as they approached their destination. "Okay, we're almost there. Wes and Scott, when we arrive I want you to get out of the car with the guns in hand. I want them to know I've got some backup so I don't get screwed over on this."

"You know we've got your back," answered Wes.

When they arrived, a long lineup of people stared at the car, most with expressions of wonder on their faces. They had obviously not seen anyone besides the military driving for some time, either, especially in a vehicle like this one. Wes and Scott stepped out of the car armed, and Deacon joined them holding his axe. The men on the roof of 12 Madonna Crescent watched them uneasily.

Paul approached the line and lifted his jerry can of gasoline above his head and pointed to it. The "bouncer" waved him to the front of the line. Paul heard more than one grunt and snide comment from those that he was budding in front of.

"So you came back! Nice ride, couldn't find a tank? Might be better on gas than that beast," said the bouncer as he checked Paul for weapons.

"Yeah, that's really funny. You should drop the guard job and become a standup," said Paul.

"You think yer funny, boy?" sneered the bouncer. He hadn't liked the reply, and stared Paul coldly in the face. Paul did not let go of the guard's gaze.

"I want my gas," replied Paul, his confidence buoyed by his group in the background.

"Oh, I see, you got balls now that you've got a few friends with ya," said the man. His breath reeked of cigarette smoke and he had horrible teeth; black and yellow with many missing. They must have been disgustingly bad long before The Arrival. "Typical punk little shit, only brave when you're in a pack. The boys on the roof could have your friends cut to pieces in a second, so you best tuck your tail between your legs and go talk to the boss now. I think he's got a little of yer rum in him, and I

think he likes ya. Maybe if you get on yer knees he'll give you another cute little puppy dog." He said the comments loud enough that everyone could hear, and the men on the roof laughed.

"Do you think I'm afraid of you?" said Paul, also loud enough for all to hear. He never had much respect for authority, and none for those that didn't deserve it. He was tired and anxious to go, but he wasn't going to back down from the man. He had never turned away from confrontation. "I've seen my friends torn apart, and my mother killed. I've survived with those little *punk* friends of mine for over a year and a half wandering through the forests with nothing to eat but bark and insects, so if you have a problem with me let's have it out. Otherwise step aside," Paul stared the guard in the face through the whole exchange. There was a quiet silence. The men in the lineup backed up.

"Sammy!" came the high pitched voice of George Wilson from inside the house. "I told you killing customers was bad for business! Drop your macho bullshit and leave the threats to me. Let the boy in."

Sammy the guard gave Paul a hideous smile and opened the gate.

The smell of smoke again greeted Paul as he entered. George Wilson sat in the very same place. He looked as if he had not even moved at all during the many hours they'd been apart. On the table sat plates with more mysterious half eaten bones along with Ted's bottle of rum, opened, and almost half gone.

"Ewww, that was exciting," said George Wilson enthusiastically. Paul had not missed his voice. He could see from the glaze in the fat man's eyes that he was drunk and his big cheeks glistened with grease from the half done meal in front of him. He continued, "But Sammy's right, you are a lot braver when you've got your friends with you."

"You would be too," answered Paul.

"True, but getting yourself killed isn't going to help either of us, now is it? Is a big gunfight going to help anyone, Jimmy?"

"No, Mr. Wilson," replied the guard, also looking as if he too hadn't moved for hours.

"I'll get the rest of your gas, son, as promised," continued the fat man. "But before you leave I have a little proposition for you." The change in his voice showed he was serious.

"One of my pets, my girl, has gone missing and I can't seem to find her anywhere. She's a little thing, but one of my favorites, isn't she Jimmy?"

"That she is, Mr. Wilson," answered the guard with a smile.

"And she's young…but I guess that's how I like them. She had a few admirers in some of the townsfolk too, and they pay handsomely for her. I used to be able to get a lot for an afternoon with her. Didn't I, Jimmy?"

"We *all* got a lot from an afternoon with her, Mr. Wilson," answered the guard.

Squeal! "Ah, Jimmy, that was clever! You should join Sammy in the stand up routine like the boy here says!" *Squeal!* Paul cringed every time he heard the fat man make that sound.

"Yes, yes. I expect she would like to hook up with a group like yours. Her name is Jessica. Jessica Ganges, I believe, like last names matter now! If you find her, and return her to me, I'll reward you handsomely. I'll give you another tank of gas, and maybe even that pistol you were looking for. Have we got a deal, my little man?"

Paul felt like he was going to throw up. It took him a moment to gather his composure. "Yeah…yeah, if we come across her I'll be sure to do that."

"Hmmm," replied the fat man. He looked as if he suspected something from Paul's sudden change of composure. "You do that. Jimmy, get this kid some gas and get him outta my sight, I tire of him."

"Yes, Mr. Wilson," replied Jimmy as he grabbed a couple of jerry cans readied for Paul's return. Jimmy escorted Paul out.

"And keep him away from Sammy!" echoed George Wilson's voice from inside the house. "Killing customers is bad for business!"

Chapter 10 – Asphalt dreams

Wesley David – Entry # 10

I write this squished in the backseat of a 1970s Lincoln Towncar. Please excuse the messy writing, I've got a dog jumping on me every two minutes and Anna bumping my elbow.

We are on the road to Jasper with a full tank of gas from the guy Ted Williams sent us to. Paul seemed spooked after he left the house, maybe it's best we left. A bottle of rum for a tank of gas, who would have thought it. But I guess the things that have value haven't changed, oil and booze.

The mist is thick today. So thick that Anna isn't even looking out the windows, she's just staring at the floor. Paul has hit the brakes suddenly a few times for no reason. I think he's seeing things too. We're going slow, like under twenty, so we're hoping to get far on this gas. But we all know it isn't going to get us all the way to the coast, probably not even close. I expect we should get a few hundred kilometers anyway. A hell of a lot better than walking. Much better. We finally have gas now, but unfortunately we're getting light on food. There's always something in short supply.

If we don't find some more food soon, we're going to have to start eating each other.

* * *

They sat quietly in the car as it slowly descended into what had once been Jasper National Park. It was a sunny day but the mist sat heavy in the air.

Paul kept the speed down to a minimum as they drove into the park. They stared at a huge mountain rising above them in the distance that resembled an Aboriginal with a headdress looking up into the sky. It was once called Pocahontas. Large clouds of mist floated around the snow covered peaks of the mountains ahead. Jasper was a beautiful and deadly place. The abundant wildlife throughout the once national park attracted both hungry humans and hungry creatures.

Traveling in the slow moving car was peaceful. They found very little time in the last year to be alone with their thoughts. They were in far less danger in the moving car, and it allowed them to relax.

* * *

Deacon stared at the frozen peaks that pierced the sky. He loved the mountains and they brought some calm to his troubled mind. *They'll be here long after I'm dead and gone.* The last few days were taxing on him and he felt empty and exhausted. Paul showed himself as the real leader of the group, able to make the difficult decisions, and able to perform in a pinch. Deacon didn't mind, he didn't need to be the leader. They looked to him sometimes, because he was the biggest and the strongest, but it was Paul's spirit and courage that mattered. Given the opportunity again, Deacon would prove to the group what he was made of. As they drove, Deacon thought of Sara Williams' letter tucked away in his pocket, seeming to burn his skin. The mountains did little to calm him when he thought about its words.

* * *

Paul absolutely loved the feeling of being behind the wheel of a vehicle again. Nothing could touch them in the car. He could outrun any creature that tried to catch them, and run over, or around, anything that challenged them. He always said there was safety in being on the move and they couldn't be much more on the move than this. Paul checked the gas again; still three quarters of a tank. *I wonder how far we'll get?*

* * *

Liv looked at Jen leaning on Deacon's shoulder in the front of the car. *That must be nice.* Liv hadn't had anyone to lean on for a long time. Before this whole mess she'd never had any trouble finding someone when she was lonely. She knew all of the boys peeked at her when she bathed, but they acted shy and quiet when face to face with her. Even after a year. Only Deacon was real to her, Deacon had confidence, and he was taken. Liv stared out the small side window and watched the trees slowly pass by and quietly sighed. She pushed the feelings she had for him back down below the surface where they belonged. But she couldn't help but feel that they were meant to be together.

* * *

Wes sat with the puppy sleeping quietly on his lap. A joy at first, the dog was proving to be a nuisance. She was noisy and had already had an accident in the car. Wes had jagged bite marks from her dagger-like puppy teeth all over his hands and arms, even some on his face. But when the puppy slept it reminded him of his old dog, Drex. *You're not so bad when you're asleep, Lucky*, he thought fondly, *maybe we won't eat you just yet.*

* * *

Anna sat happily squished in the large backseat between Scott and Wes. She petted the puppy on Wes's lap as it quietly breathed. Its oversized paws kicked and its nose clinched as it dreamed. Anna smiled at Wes as they both saw it. *I wonder what you're dreaming about? It must be nicer than my own.* Anna stared out the window and saw a screaming horned creature in the rocks of a nearby mountain side. She shut her eyes tight and turned her head back into the vehicle. *Damn mist. It must be great to be a dog.*

* * *

Jen slept quietly against Deacon's side. In her dream her mother looked up at her from the hatchway of the cellar of their old house. There was a strange animal painted on it. She wanted Jen to come down, but it was dark down there, and she felt a strong sense of dread coming from within.

* * *

Scott sat himself down at his favourite pasta spot, Romero's Bistro. He imagined himself shoveling the tender, chewy ravioli, spaghetti, linguini, tortellini, garlic breads, soups, and fresh, crisp salads into his mouth. Succulent sauces of tomato and pesto, alfredo and meat, seafood, mushrooms, sausage. In his mind the waitresses kept bringing plate after plate of food and he would eat and eat and never tire or get filled up. Scott's stomach growled loud enough that Anna looked over at him.

"The pasta restaurant?"

"Yeah…the restaurant," sighed Scott in reply. They came to know each other well over the last year. Scott watched the trees pass by and it wasn't long until he again sat down at the table for an all new meal.

* * *

"Hey, Deek, can I ask you a question?" said Paul softly, out of the blue after a quiet hour of driving.

Deacon looked at him curiously. "Yeah, what?"

Wes and Scott listened quietly in the back.

"When we left Ted and Sara's house, I…well we…noticed Sara pulled you aside for a while… and she handed you something, you kind of dodged us when we first asked," said Paul quietly. Jen

was asleep and it was the reason Paul chose this time to ask the question. "I can't say that I…well, we…haven't been wondering what that was all about."

Deacon looked at him and didn't respond. Liv and Anna were now listening in on the conversation. They had all quietly discussed it in private.

Paul continued, "I don't mean to pry, pal, if it's personal or something and you don't want to share that's cool, but the whole time we were there you didn't say one thing or have one direct personal conversation with her, at least thart I saw." Paul was waiting for some kind of a response. He thought prodding might get Deacon started.

Deacon still did not respond. Paul was ready to drop the question, when Anna piped up.

"If she said something strange, I wouldn't be surprised. *She knew my parents' names.* Don't ask me how, or why. I know none of you told her, I already asked the girls, and I doubt any of you remember what they were."

Scott, Wes, Deacon, and Paul all reached into their heads and came up with nothing.

Anna continued, "That kinda stuff scares me as much as those creatures out there. Is it just me, or have things kind of…changed…since the portals opened? I don't mean *that* kind of obvious change of course, I mean the hallucinations we're having, and strange predictions and stuff. It freaks me out, it's like reality isn't playing by the rules anymore. I've been having weird sensations and visions myself, lately."

They were all almost as surprised by Anna's story as the fact she spoke so much. Over the last few days Anna was really pulling herself together.

"That's creepy, Anna. Not circus-clown-creepy, but pretty creepy," said Scott.

"What she said was pretty creepy too. I thought someone would ask me about it again," said Deacon. "After she was done talking to me she gave me a note. I have no idea why she gave it to *me*. Paul's right. I barely even talked to her the whole time we were there. The note and what she said to me scares me even more now if she did have some kind of…*ability*. Ted mentioned she had some kind

of a sixth sense of a sort, and she did wake him up before we were attacked. I used to think that kind of stuff was bullshit, but then again, I used to think flesh eating creatures and portals were bullshit too."

Deacon reached into his pocket and struggled to remove the small note from his tight blue jeans. He opened the note and read it again to himself. Shaking his head, he handed it to Paul.

Paul locked his knee to the wheel and read the note out loud:

Do not fear the passage to the world beyond. Your destinies, and our future, lie there.

Sara.

There was a silence as they all looked for a meaning in the note.

"Okay, *that's* circus-clown-creepy," said Scott.

"The words on the note are not too far off from the words she spoke to me," said Deacon. "I don't think I want to go into exactly what she said right now. I think I've got to figure it out for myself first. But the note itself isn't exactly a difficult riddle. I don't need to spell out to you guys what she's trying to say."

"She wants us to go across the portals. Wow," said Wes, intrigued.

"No shit, Wes. And she's crazy," said Paul, disappointed by the writing on the note. He'd imagined a map to a hidden stash of goods, or a love letter, or maybe even something like a prediction or prophecy, but nothing like this. This note was hazardous. "That's a pretty dangerous suggestion for her to make. And what's up with *our future lies in your hands*? What are we, superheroes? She's nuts."

"Well, I liked her," said Liv coming to Sara's defense. "She was sincere and I never noticed anything from her or Ted that made her seem crazy. Some people are more open to things than others, I mean look at Anna. I'm not saying Sara's psychic or a fortune teller, maybe she's just perceptive."

"Perceptive, *my ass.* A note like that to a group of impressionable young people is downright dangerous. I can see by the look on his face that Wes believes it," said Paul openly upset by the

writing.

"What?" asked Wes innocently.

Paul continued. "I can't believe she gave you a note like that, Deacon, filling our heads with destinies and crap. I wonder why she chose you, anyway?"

"Probably because if she gave it to you it would have been crumpled up, thrown away, and never spoken of again," said Anna from the back seat.

"Yeah, that's exactly what I would have done," asserted Paul.

"Then you answered your own question," said Anna.

Jen woke up and began listening to the conversation. Deacon had shown her the note long before. She had been far more curious than any of them.

"Well, Paul, you asked, and now you know, do with it what you want. I, for one, am staying as far away as I possibly can from every portal I come across," said Deacon.

"Amen," responded Scott.

They all turned to Wes.

"What? So I'm curious about what's on the other side…big deal! You all heard the stories, it's another world across those portals. I would never purposefully try to go through one, but I can't say I don't wonder what it might be like. Imagine…different stars…another sky…another—" Wes was interrupted.

"Oh, Jesus! Here we go with the other world thing, that note was all you needed," Paul looked back and was so upset that the car swerved.

"Paul! Watch what you're doing," commanded Jen.

"Sorry," Paul turned to face the road as he spoke. "Things are getting strange out there. I can't believe that note. That's not at all what I was expecting."

"The note was weird. But what she said to me was even weirder," Deacon admitted. "Oh well, don't worry guys. Sara Williams has been through a lot of hard times, too. Maybe all that stress and

sorrow has mixed up her mind. Either way, it doesn't matter, it's just a silly note…here…" Deacon undid the window and threw the note out of the car. "It's gone."

"That's a five hundred dollar fine bud, I hope you know that," commented Scott.

No one spoke for a time. They were stuck in their own thoughts, about Sara, the note, and the many things they'd been through. They watched as the mountains of Jasper slowly passed by. They drove past the many deep blue and green lakes that looked more like Kool-Aid than water.

The beauty of the park diminished as they came across a burned out semi trailer jackknifed across the road.

* * *

"Do you guys see that?" asked Paul.

"Of course, Paul, how could we miss it?" answered Jen.

"My eyes are tired and the mist is thick today. I was just checking."

As they approached the tractor trailer they saw there was only one way around it. Two tire tracks of dead grass passed alongside. It appeared that cars had previously gone that route.

"My spidey sense is tingling, guys, I don't like the looks of this," said Scott from the back. The tone of his voice made it clear he was serious.

Paul stopped the car and they observed the wreck in front of them. It was a standard semi truck and a long white trailer flipped on their side. There was no movement on or around the wreck.

"I don't know, guys, does anyone else have a suggestion? To me this seems pretty standard. Well, standard I guess for an abandoned jackknifed semi-trailer…blocking the highway…except for one…small…little…passage between the wreck and a wall of trees....Okay, maybe this is a little fishy," said Paul, speaking his thoughts aloud.

"It's a bit sophisticated for a Creeper trap, maybe it's some kind of Grey Man or Skull trap,"

said Deacon. Gray Men were among the worst of the creatures, but thankfully also among the rarest. They were intelligent enough to speak. Fangs and Creepers were animal-like for the most part, so far as they could tell, anyway.

"Yeesh, I don't like that thought," said Wes from the backseat.

"I suppose we have two choices…actually, three. We can go back and try to find another road, although there won't be one for a long time, or we can just blindly go forward and try to get by this thing," said Paul.

"And the third choice?" asked Jen.

"I guess someone could get out and check," said Paul, almost to himself.

They quietly looked at each other. No one made a move.

"I can," said Deacon, who quickly stepped out of the car, giving Jen no opportunity to protest.

They watched as he left the car and made his way slowly to the narrow passage beside the trailer. It was covered in long grass speckled with small orange and purple flowers. He glanced back at them and smiled as he approached. It was nice of him to make their decision easy. There had been numerous abandoned semi trailers, cars and trucks along the sides of the road on their way here, but none blocked the road like this. Deacon approached the side of the trailer and looked around. Muddy tracks that made their way back onto the highway past the trailer was all he could see. Deacon signaled thumbs up to the car and made his way around the corner.

"I guess that's that," said Paul. He pulled the car in to drive and began his approach off the highway and along the grass of the shoulder.

Suddenly Deacon came running full speed around the corner with a look of horror on his face. It was a trap. A huge black beast followed him.

"Holy God! Paul! Turn us around!" screamed Jen seeing the terror in Deacon's face.

From behind the trailer pure horror chased after Deacon. It was a Giant Black, the beast that haunted their darkest nightmares. Worse than Creepers, worse than Fangs, worse than bandits and

religious zealots and Skulls and Scorps, worse than Grey Men…worse than Satan himself. Deacon's light limp and injuries disappeared as he ran full tilt fueled by the adrenaline that pumped through his body. He ran like a trained athlete, fast and delirious with long steady strides toward the car, but the beast was close, its shadow already overtaking him.

A deep scream erupted from the creature behind him, so loud that it roared over the sound of the engine. It sounded like the scream of a terrified horse, only so incredibly long and powerful all of them instinctively covered their ears. The back passenger side window of the car exploded onto Wes and Anna from the sheer force of the sound. Deacon fell to the ground as the scream smacked him from behind with the force of a wave.

Oh Jesus, he's a dead man this time, thought Paul.

The Giant Black was the largest of the creatures that came through the portals. At least, the largest they'd seen on the newscasts before they ended. It walked upright on two giant legs standing easily twenty feet tall and weighed in the range of a large elephant or rhinoceros, the only mammals that could even compare to it. Enormous black antlers protruded from its huge dog shaped head. Its cloven feet dug deeply into the soft flowered grass below as it surged toward the car. It was difficult for them to distinguish the details of its form because of the pure darkness of its scales. It was a massive walking nightmare.

There was only silence in the car as the terror of the situation took a moment to strike the group. They stared in awe as Deacon struggled to get to his feet after the scream ended. Behind him the form continued to approach.

"Paul! Reverse!" shouted Jen right into his ear. The scream from the creature was so loud it was like they had been at a rock concert, and Paul could barely hear her yell even though she was inches from his ear. But he saw her panicked face and mouth forming his name, and snapped out of his paralysis and jammed the car into reverse. The wheels tore into action and spun on the wet grass of the shoulder. Time seemed to be in slow motion as the old car sluggishly made its way back onto the

highway.

Deacon was up again and running, his instincts were strong, as was his body. He stared at them with wide eyes and an open mouth as the car backed away, almost as if he thought they were going to abandon him. Paul saw the expression in Deacon's eyes as he ran: cold and accusing. Paul slowed the car almost to a stop and Jen opened the passenger side window. The Giant Black was fast, far faster than Deacon. They watched the creature gaining as Deacon approached.

"Jesus, Paul, go! We're all gonna die if you don't!" screamed Anna from the backseat. "Go or it's all of us!"

Liv turned and slapped Anna across the face. "We're not leaving him!"

"We haven't come this far together for that!" shouted Paul to the backseat as Deacon and the creature approached. The idea of escaping without Deacon occurred to Paul too. They likely could have made it without too much difficultly, especially if they left Deacon as a sacrifice, much as they had Jessica. But Paul couldn't do it again. *I didn't kill that little girl for nothing.* He promised himself no one would get left behind again. It was time for them to stand their ground, and Paul slowed down the reversing car so Deacon could catch up.

Deacon made for the open window. He dove head first into the front seat, so fast his head bashed into Jen's face knocking her back into Paul. Deacon's survival instincts were strong, and he wanted in the car. With his feet dangling out of the passenger side window Deacon grabbed onto the steering wheel to pull himself in, and in doing so, sent the vehicle veering backward toward the far ditch. Paul tore Deacon's strong hand from the wheel and attempted to straighten out. Scott, Liv, Wes, and even Anna now had their own hands on Deacon, grabbing his shirt, pants, and even his hair, to try to bring him fully into the car. They succeeded in getting Deacon secured but his feet still dangled outside.

There was a deafening smash as the beast plowed an enormous black fist onto the front corner of the car, sending it spinning into the ditch. The head light exploded and the windshield ruptured into

spider webs. Anna screamed as they spun on the damp grass. They ended up backwards and stalled out.

Again the beast let go another horrifying scream, with its head pointed into the sky and its fists clenched. Sinewy black muscles tensed and its antlers partially blocked the awesome range of snow capped mountains and trees behind it. At its feet colourful mountain flowers swayed in the light breeze. It was a vision that none of them would ever forget.

Paul felt warmth in the front of his pants. His bladder released and he could barely breathe. He felt as if he was going to vomit, and like he was in slow motion, unable to react in some horrible nightmare. The magnitude of the beast's scream was so incredibly intense that he could feel the vibrations deep inside his chest cavity. He stared at the beast, and realized that the scream was a weapon, meant to paralyze its prey.

It was working.

Again it was Jen who brought him out of his stupor. Paul turned his head toward her. He could not hear her voice over the scream of the beast but the picture of her face brought him back to reality. Her nose had exploded from being smashed by Deacon's head, and blood poured over her pretty mouth and down her neck. One of her eyes began to shut and was a fresh strawberry red. It hurt Paul to see her like that. He could tell she was yelling at him.

Paul turned the key and to his surprise the engine fired up instantly. The scream ceased abruptly and his mind and reflexes came back under his control. He slammed the car into reverse and it spun backward, and just in time as the beast again swung its mighty fist downward. The second blow, intended for the roof of the car, would have broken Deacon's back as he lay horizontally across the front seat. Luckily, the tires gripped onto the grass, and the Towncar backed up enough that only the front left bumper felt the tremendous blow.

"Get your head outta the way!" Paul screamed at Scott with all his might as he struggled to see out the of the rear window as he reversed the car. Scott looked dazed from the scream but managed to

duck. The tires of the car hit the asphalt and they all jerked forward. The beast made chase after the reversing car, its huge legs making gigantic strides.

"Faster, Paul!" cried Liv from the backseat.

"This is it, I can't go any faster, I'm gonna lose control otherwise!" Paul yelled.

They were moving at a good clip, and a downright dangerous speed for reverse, but the beast kept up. There was a steady clop as the creature's great hooves hit the asphalt. There was no escape in sight at this pace, only a dangerous stalemate that threatened to end each time Paul veered too far to one side. The chase seemed to go on for eternity. There was no opportunity to turn the car around as the creature was too close and would easily catch them if they attempted to. They all stared in terror at the beast as it made chase.

"Ram it, Paul," said Wes suddenly from behind him, barely loud enough for him to hear. "Ram it! Why not? We're gonna veer off the road any minute….Ram it! There's nothing left for us back there anyway." Wes punched Paul on his shoulder.

Scott whooped from the backseat in support of the idea. "Fuck it! We can't live forever!"

Paul considered it. It was either a brilliant or a deadly suggestion. Paul did not know which, perhaps it was both, but they would find out soon enough. He took a deep breath, turned his head forward and slammed on the brakes.

No one heard Anna mutter to herself, "Will this nightmare ever end?"

"Holy shit!" was all Deacon could come up with as the car slowed to a half stop. He managed to pull himself fully inside the car and sit upright.

"You're crazy!" squealed Liv from the back.

Paul jerked the car into drive so fast he was lucky he didn't drop the transmission. The wheels spun and the car jerked forward, slower than he would have liked under the weight of seven and a half passengers. The beast did not miss a single step and charged the vehicle. They came together head on, face to hideous face. At the last moment Paul spun the wheel to the right, catching the beast's left leg.

It wasn't until later they realized how much force the mammoth car and its passengers must have had. The side mirror smashed as the beast brought down its clawed hand along the side of the car, slicing metal as it passed. Glass exploded and metal tore, but the car carried on.

As they passed by the beast Scott turned back to see it spin around from the force of the impact and topple onto the roadway, breaking half of one of its large antlers into pieces as its head hit the ground. Scott could see it struggling to get to its feet as the car flew down the road. It was injured, but still very much alive.

"It's up, Paul!" called Scott. "But I don't think it's after us."

The car flew toward the trailer and they drove along the tire tracks beside it without pause. It was lucky they passed with the speed they did as the tracks were muddy and treacherous. Hidden behind the trailer were huge mounds of bone, horn, and pelts from many kills. Blood stained the asphalt for a distance. Paul had the car at one twenty for fifteen minutes before he dared to slow down. Deacon helped Jen with her bloodied face.

After a time in silence, Scott spoke. "I seriously pissed my pants back there. I'm not kidding… my seat is soaked." The comment was intended to try to lighten them up, but even Scott was at his wits' end. He spoke loud, as all of their ears still rung from the scream.

"I did too," said Paul in reply. The car began to stink of urine as they slowed down and the sun shone inside. Scott and Paul owned up to it, but they weren't the only guilty ones. Luckily, the now broken side window allowed good air flow throughout the vehicle.

"Next time," said Deacon, "someone else goes to check."

Chapter 11 – Behind the Curtain

Wesley David – Entry # 11

It's been a real slice since I last updated my journal. We encountered a Giant Black. I can't believe I'm even still alive to write about it. I've never been as scared in my life as I was today. I could almost touch the fear, like it wasn't an emotion, like it was a person sitting beside me. Fear placed her hand on my shoulder and smiled—with sharp, wicked teeth.

Somehow we all survived again. I don't want to write about it; even now I can still hear the echo of its awful scream in my heart.

Deacon read us his strange note from Mrs. Sara Williams. It told us to "Pass across to the world beyond" or something like that, and it mentioned destiny. Pretty strange stuff, and like Paul said, a pretty dangerous suggestion. I would, like Paul, simply assume she's nuts but there is some evidence pointing to her having some weird abilities. Ted said she could sense attacks before they happened, and she woke him up just before we were attacked. Anna claimed she somehow knew her parents' names and we all got a weird vibe from her when we were there. I don't know what to think really, but why couldn't it be true?

I've always thought there is more to the world than what we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. I guess that's why I buy into Sara's note, at least somewhat. I don't mean I believe in things like the Loch Ness Monster, alien autopsies, or the Sasquatch, but I believe there's more to life than we perceive. More dimension. More layers to reality. At night when I stare up at the stars in the sky an image always comes to me. It was a picture taken by the Hubble space telescope, from years ago. They took a single random photo of deep space, one photo, a square inch in the vast 360 degree universe. I remember this photo in detail because it contained more galaxies than I could count. Spirals, double spirals, clouds, balls, horse heads, shields, donuts, and ovals in all shapes colors and sizes. And I'm talking galaxies, not stars. Galaxies. Clusters of thousands of galaxies each with billions of stars in

one tiny square inch of space. The size and complexity of the universe goes beyond comprehension. So who knows what goes on out there?

Who in a million years is ever gonna read this?

* * *

They sat together around the campfire as it crackled and hissed. They were cleaned, fed, and beginning to shed the terror of the day's earlier events. They drove many kilometers farther into the mountains without stopping, besides one rushed bathroom break, until darkness crept into the valleys. They finally stopped when they found an old campground. The empty camping stalls were now overgrown with weeds and brush and covered in deadfall. It was once called 'The Whistlers', and was beyond the small tourist town of Jasper they passed by without even entering as the possibility of even more excitement was more than they could take. The group huddled together around the fire, in their blankets with hair freshly washed, and clothes hung to dry. The boys gathered wood and set up a small camp while the girls cooked a meager dinner. Even after the world ended, some roles didn't change.

They made themselves comfortable. Jen leaned lazily against Deacon who chewed on a stalk of wet grass. Paul sat on his small stool and warmed his hands against the glow of the fire. Wes sat quietly writing in his notebook and occasionally staring up at the night sky as Lucky slept on his lap. The smear of the Milky Way was clear nights like this. Together these stars, along with the pale slice of moon, provided a silvery light that allowed them to see each other in the darkness. Anna sat with Liv under a blanket, both of them with their chins resting on their hands like the statue of The Thinker. They had both already moved past the events in the car. Firelight danced across their pretty faces and in their eyes. Scott laid on his back gazing into the night sky as he warmed his bare feet against the fire.

"What do you think is on the other side, Wes?" asked Paul quietly.

Wes looked up from his notebook. "The other side of what?"

"The portals. What do you think is on the other side?" Paul asked more clearly, sounding annoyed that Wes made him repeat a question that he didn't want to ask in the first place.

"Oh…yeah. I thought that you didn't like to talk about stuff like that? But, since you're asking, I think…no one knows. I figure probably it's just other planets, most of them something like this one, somewhere out there." Wes pointed up into the night sky. "But there are any number of possibilities. Maybe another time, another dimension. It could be the magical Land of Oz for all I know. Why are you asking?"

"Well, Wes, like you I've got an *insatiable curiosity,*" Paul smiled at him. "I'm just thinkin' about Deek's note, and what happened today. Sometimes I've had the feeling I, well, actually, that all seven of us have had some pretty extraordinary luck. I mean, look at some of the things we've managed to find and the people we've come across. Sometimes it all feels set up. I guess I'm wondering what we should do if the coast is worse than it is here. Maybe when we get there we will wish we were back in Alberta where we would only get attacked once a week instead of once a day."

"Yeah, I've considered that," responded Deacon joining the campfire conversation. "The coast could be worse, that's a distinct possibility, but I can't see it being worse than whatever it is that's on the other side of the portals. I mean really, that's where *they* came from…right?"

"Not necessarily true," said Wes. "I remember the news said the mist only flows out of certain portals and they thought the creatures only came out of different portals, so maybe it's possible some lead somewhere safe. I'm sure you heard that some opened up and had absolutely nothing come out of them. It's all luck of the draw. But the scary part for me is that there could be no way of guaranteeing a way home, and even if we could get back, who knows exactly where we would end up. Africa? Antarctica…?"

"Disneyland," commented Scott. No one laughed.

"That's the chance you take, I suppose, but what does it matter?" Wes continued. "Assuming you would survive crossing over and not end up in the middle of an ocean or a volcano, or a den of Creepers, would we even want to come back? It's not like we have a home or anything to hold onto here, besides each other."

"But what would it be like?" asked Paul.

"Jesus, Paul, I don't know! I've never been there. All I know is you can breathe the air in some of them. The Chinese soldiers that showed up near Calgary told stories of fantastic animals and intelligent creatures. But maybe that was just their portal, and maybe they were lying, or imagined it. I have no idea what it would be like, we could wind up knee deep on the seventh level of hell for all I know."

Wes's comment quieted the conversation. Deacon could feel Jen cringe when Wes mentioned hell. Deacon suspected she thought The Arrival was the work of God. He was happy she wasn't pushing them toward the Isack situation in Utah.

"I'll tell you what I do like about the note, though," continued Wes after a time, realizing Paul was in an open mood of sorts. "I like the idea of us having, well, a mission I suppose. I know you think I'm a dreamer, Paul, and in some ways I am, but that note got me inspired somewhere deep down. On the other hand, I will honestly say I don't think the note is true *per se*. I think Sara Williams is a lady that has lost two children, her life, and her friends, and she uses this *psychic* thing to deal with it. Kinda like Scott uses his bad jokes."

"Hey!" said Scott sounding hurt. He wasn't though. Wes knew him well enough to know that.

"Sorry, Scott, but like I was saying, I like the idea of us trying to do something about, well, the world. I don't know about you guys but everything I dreamed about in life is out the window. Being famous, or rich, or even comfortable seems impossible now."

"So is having a bunch of kids and a nice house," said Jen.

"Or designing skyscrapers," said Deacon.

"Or traveling to Australia," said Anna quietly.

"Or driving a monster truck over your boss's car," added Scott.

Wes laughed. "See? You know what I mean. I don't have a goal anymore, all I need to do is survive. At first I kind of liked that, for the last year and a half life has been simple, find food without becoming food. But I'm starting to a feel a little empty. We're not monkeys, at least, most of us aren't." Wes looked at Scott accusingly and continued. "The First Nations used to do basically what we're doing now, living off the land in the wild, but they had spirituality and social interactions that gave their life meaning. All we've got is each other, and old movies and shows to talk about. There's got to be more to life than this, it's as simple as that."

"Dude, if you want to worship something we won't get in the way. Here, I've got this old coffee cup," Paul reached into his backpack and handed it to Wes. It read, *Monday Sucks.*

Wes made bowing motions to the cup as they all laughed. "Oh, mighty cup!" he chanted. "Tell me where I can find this Monday and I will see that it is smote!" Even Anna smiled at Wes's behavior. Wes stopped and held the cup in his hand.

"I know what you're saying, Wes," responded Paul after the show. "And I'm sorry I give you such a hard time about stuff like this, it's natural to be afraid of what you don't understand, and I don't understand anything about the world anymore. I guess I'm asking all of you, where does this leave us?"

"I don't think we should do anything different," responded Jen. "If it turns out we are destined to do something, if God has some greater plan, it will happen whether we want it to or not."

"Well, not really," argued Wes. "That thinking doesn't work for me. You're saying that we're not in control of our own destiny. I don't think I buy that. The great men of the past haven't just sat down and said, 'I'm a man of destiny, so I'll sit here and wait for something to happen.'"

"I used to do that and occasionally something great would happen...the pizza would arrive!" joked Scott.

"Jesus, you make it difficult to have an adult conversation, you idiot!" barked Liv. She threw a stick of wood at Scott that missed him by so much he didn't even flinch.

"So what have we decided?" asked Deacon after the commotion. "It all sounds fun and exciting, but fun and excitement like that are for books and movies. We've had our share of *excitement* and it usually means we almost get killed, and I get the shit kicked out of me. Personally, I want as little action and excitement as possible. But here's the real question: Even if we did find ourselves on the other side of the portals, what do we do then? Is there going to be some evil King that's controlling all this? Or maybe some alien corporation? Or the devil? What if these portals are the natural way of things, what if there isn't a switch to turn them off, or a wizard hidden behind the curtain?" Deacon began speaking very fast, sharing some of the thoughts swimming in his head since receiving the note from Sara Williams. "Even if we do somehow find a way to stop it, won't we be trapped on some far out world? What if there's no food or water there? What if we can't get home? I know I don't have my basement suite anymore, or my old roommate, but for twenty one of my last twenty three years this planet has treated me pretty good."

"But Deacon," asked Anna quietly, "what if there *is* a wizard behind the curtain?"

* * *

No one spoke for a time. They listened to the coyotes howl in the distance and to the fire as it crackled and sparked.

"Okay, you guys. This conversation is ridiculous, and you actually wonder why I don't take you seriously when you talk like this?" asked Scott. "The United States sent over a million troops across the portals. Professional soldiers with machine guns, equipment, provisions, helicopters, tanks, and those cool glasses that let you see in the dark. Men that were trained to do things like 'find the wizard'. Every country sent their people, never mind the religious and the just plain curious that

crossed over. And do you know where they probably are now? Dead. We've all seen too many Hollywood movies. In *real* life things are never simple and there aren't easy answers and solutions. Look, I don't bitch and complain much, and I always like to go with the flow of the group, but the thought of crossing through the portals is ludicrous." Scott looked each of them in the eye and spoke with a conviction that surprised them. "It's crazy, and we will probably get killed even trying. In *real* life dogs die and people get cancer. In *real* life, the good guys usually lose, or there are no good guys at all."

"Scott," said Anna quietly, "in *real* life do monsters come out of portals and eat people?"

Scott stared at her, realizing her point. "Well, yes, I suppose they do, but…"

Anna continued. "In *real* life do you see strange old men, ghosts, talking rocks, and hallucinations when you breathe too much of the mist that has poured out of gateways to other worlds?"

"I don't know if that stuff is real but…yes...well…you can't…see…I suppose you do now, but—" Scott was interrupted as he stammered.

"*Real* life has become pretty *unreal* if you ask me," said Anna who was also speaking with unusual passion. "I don't think we have any conventions to stand on anymore, Scott. Everything has changed and either we change with it, or we we die." Scott looked into her eyes, wide with conviction. She was definitely getting better.

"Where does this leave us, then?" asked Deacon.

"I don't see any reason to change our course," said Paul. "Let's see what the coast has to offer before we go gallivanting across the universe. You guys do realize we would have to find a portal first, and we've never seen one before that wasn't on TV. I remember reading they were pretty hard to find, and from most angles they're invisible. Let's go to the coast, like we agreed, and if we aren't happy there then maybe we can consider Sara's note. Is that cool?"

Everyone agreed.

"I'm ready to hit the sack. If you don't mind I call the backseat of the car," said Liv.

"Can I join you?" grinned Scott. "It's been a while since I had a girl alone in the backseat."

"And it's gonna be a while longer," said Liv as she got up. It wasn't long until the rest of the group found their way to bed as well.

* * *

It was a cold, early September night in the mountains. The air was crisp and damp with the smell of pine and campfire. Deacon lay with Jen beside him in the tent. With the addition of the car for sleeping spots they had one entire tent to themselves for the night, and they took advantage. Sex was a welcome escape for both of them from the harshness of reality. Deacon came to rely on that escape, and to rely on Jen. Usually she was the only thing that allowed him to fall directly asleep without the constant insomnia that many of them suffered from, but it failed tonight, and he lay awake with his mind troubled. *The worlds beyond* kept running through his head along with the other cryptic things Sara said to him. Even the loopy calligraphy of Sara Williams's handwriting was seared into his mind. *The worlds beyond*…the others would go to them one day, there was no doubt in his mind anymore. But would he? Deacon tossed in bed for an hour longer before getting up when he couldn't listen to his own thoughts any longer. It was better for him to be outside on watch than awake in bed anyway.

"I wondered when you would come back out, pal," said Paul quietly as Deacon unzipped his tent and peered out. Paul knew Deacon wouldn't sleep, and had been expecting him. They knew each other *that* well. Paul himself knew better than to even try, but he had nothing waiting for him in his bed.

"Yeah, I couldn't stand the thought of you sitting out here all by yourself," said Deacon sarcastically as he slipped on his shoes. The mountain air was downright cold, and a strong breeze blew through the forest. Deacon shivered as he did up the buttons on his worn out jean jacket. He

walked by the fire and sat down on a log.

"It's getting cold and misty out here," said Deacon stirring up the conversation.

"Yes," answered Paul as he tended the fire with a small stick. "Actually, it's getting *very* cold and *very* misty, my man." Paul, like Wes, loved to burn the end of a branch and pull it out of the fire. He would write letters as the smoke drifted off the end. It was mesmerizing and Deacon watched him with enjoyment for some time. Suddenly the breeze kicked up and a small white piece of paper blew by Paul's face and landed beside him.

"What's that?" asked Deacon. The wind died quickly, and there was strange calm surrounding them. They could hear the crackle and pop of the fire, but besides that, there was not even a sound. The paper sat unmoving beside Paul. Together they stared at it.

"Are you gonna pick it up?" asked Deacon. There was a quiet dread in his voice he could not hide. His heart pounded in his chest.

Paul hesitated, staring at the small white piece of paper. "I don't think I want to. If this is some kind of trick…." Paul's voice was quavering even more than Deacon's. They both were considering an impossible possibility.

"It could be anything, Paul. We can't sit here until it blows away again. Pick it up and read it," urged Deacon.

Paul looked down at the crinkled piece of paper. Both he and Deacon sat breathlessly considering what it was, and what it said. He felt a great sense of awareness, almost like he was in a dream. The thought was comforting. "Am I dreaming, Deacon?"

"No. No, you're not. Unless *I'm* dreaming. No, this is definitely *my* reality. If this is a dream, it's mine," answered Deacon. "I'm definitely not in *your* dream, anyway."

"Jesus. I feel like I'm floating. There's a sanctuary of butterflies in my stomach. I think I might get sick," said Paul.

"The paper, Paul. Pick it up and read it," said Deacon, desperately trying to keep his head in

the game. Around them the mist curled and hovered.

Paul looked at the note. Even the light breeze was now dead, and an eerie calm surrounded them. Paul slowly reached for it and pulled his hand back. "How far away would you say we are from where you threw it out of the car?"

"Oh, I'd say we're at least forty to fifty kilometers. You gassed it pretty good after the festivities," answered Deacon.

Paul looked at Deacon intensely and spoke. "Do you know what the chances are of that note ending up here? It's beyond coincidence. If you're messing with me and didn't throw it out, I'll….It just wouldn't be a cool thing to do after all we have been through together and how I consider you my friend and family, Deacon."

"Paul, you saw it fly from my hand with your own eyes!" answered Deacon. "You know goddamn well I wouldn't do something like that. You know I'm not creative enough to even think up something like this. Jesus! Read the note, maybe it's just a phone number, maybe it's blank…."

Paul looked down at the note. He grabbed it and held it in his hand. Still he stared at Deacon.

"Dude! Read it already. I'm gonna have a heart attack, here."

Paul read the note. He looked up at Deacon with huge eyes. He moved to place the note into the fire.

"Wait…if you don't let me read it too you'll never know if what it says was just in your head," said Deacon. "It's misty out here."

Paul pulled the paper back from the fire. "Maybe you…maybe we…maybe all of us will be better off if you don't read it."

"I'll take that chance," answered Deacon and he reached his quivering hand for the paper. Paul looked at him with dread and handed it off.

Deacon shivered when he touched it. He took a deep breath and read:

Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel

The hotel in the heart of the Canadian Rockies.

Room 733.

2 Nights 07/06/97.....295.00
RM. SRV.....63.20
HTL TX.....30.00
G.S.T.....27.17

Total.....415.37

Thank you. Merci.

Deacon looked up at Paul and shook his head.

Paul burst out laughing.

"It's just an old receipt, you asshole!" said Deacon.

"Yeah, and it had you going pretty good!" laughed Paul.

"Would you guys shut up!" groaned Scott from inside his tent.

Deacon replied in a quieter voice as he crumpled up the note and tossed it in the fire. "It had you going too for a while, don't even try to deny that."

"Yeah it did, man…at first," admitted Paul through his giggling. "You and Wes have gotten to me, I have to admit. A stupid hotel receipt. Never before would I have ever even considered it could be Sara's note. It's a big step for me."

"I'm going back to bed…call me if we get more mail," grunted Deacon as he got up and went back to his sleeping girlfriend. Deacon thought about Sara's words as he quietly slipped back into his sleeping bag. She mentioned a hotel to him. Likely it was a coincidence, but the more and more Deacon thought about the receipt the more uncomfortable he became.

As Deacon lay awake in his sleeping bag, he could hear Paul continue to giggle softly.

Chapter 12 – Lost in the Fog

Wesley David - Entry 12

I write this as we prepare a small breakfast of moose jerky and the last of our canned corn. The food is getting light, I think were going to have to go hunting soon or find some more houses. I must weigh less than 160 pounds right now. I used to weigh over 200. My arms and my legs are getting to be skin and bone. I haven't had much chance to see my face over the last few months but the rear view mirror of the car shows a face I hardly recognize. My cheekbones are sticking out and my eyes look like they've sunk into my head. It's startling to see yourself this way. But the weight loss isn't just because we're malnourished, I think the constant exercise has a lot to do with it. I actually have a six pack. It's not easy to see, but if I stretch you can't miss it. Scott was the most surprised by his appearance in the rearview, he must have lost at least sixty or seventy pounds. He's not much bigger than me now but still flabbier.

Looking at Liv scares me sometimes. She's a twig. She eats the least, and even when we're famished she's still picky at the dinner table. Deacon is the only one among us who has managed to keep his size. He's still got to be over 200 pounds. In fact, I wonder if he looks bigger than before. More muscle-y. He eats as much as, and as often as, he can.

We're back on the road today so I guess we'll see how far our gas will get us. The mist is thick this morning. It's unusually bad and seems to be thickening. I think it started collecting last night. It's probably as bad as I've ever seen it right now, except of course, on that awful night at Anna's parents' house.

I think it's going to be an interesting day.

* * *

"Unbelievable!" exclaimed Scott. "I can barely see my hand in front of my face."

"I know," replied Paul. "It came in thick last night. Maybe it's worse because we're up so high,

the natural fog mixes with it and it only gets thicker."

It was not a good start to the day. They packed as best they could as the mist continued to thicken around them. They could barely see the car parked only ten feet away from the tents. The girls struggled to cook a meager breakfast for the group. They sat in silence around the dying campfire as they ate. Everyone wanted to get their share of food as they had switched to only two meals a day, along with the occasional afternoon snack.

"I've never seen it this bad before," said Liv. "Except, you-know-when, and I don't like it. Every time I look out into the fog my imagination takes over."

"Yeah, no kidding," agreed Scott.

"There must be some low lying cloud up here. That's all I can figure, but I think the mist would be thick today anyway, even if it was all natural," said Paul.

"You make sure you tie that goddamn dog up good, Wes," added Deacon. "The last thing we need to do is chase that mutt through the forest in fog like this."

"Don't worry, she's tied to the car and I think the smell of breakfast has got her attention. Make sure you guys save your leftovers for her," said Wes, as seriously as he could.

Most of the group chuckled. *Leftovers.*

"It's disturbing. I can't wait to get out of here," muttered Jen.

The mist continued to condense as they packed up. Many of them tripped and scratched their hands and faces on hidden branches around the camp. It was also cold and miserable. Anna complained bitterly about seeing things in the mist.

"It's like any other misty day, Anna. Remember it's in your head, you should know that by now," scolded Jen.

"Tell that to the guy in the top hat who keeps waving at me," answered Anna quietly.

* * *

They finally packed up the car and were preparing to leave when Scott spoke up.

"Before we go, I need a minute. Could you pass a newspaper?"

"Sure," answered Liv, shooting Scott a small smile.

Newspaper was a common find in the many homes they searched and it served a multitude of functions. It was usually a good read and a nice escape into the past, it was an excellent source of kindling, but most importantly, it took over the role that the now scarce toilet paper once played. They would occasionally come across a roll in an abandoned cabin or farmhouse, but it would be used up quickly. Toilet paper became a valuable commodity and it was among the first things they looked for, just after food. While newspaper was less comfortable, and while there was a great deal more friction, it still did the job, although Scott would often complain that a person could read the sports scores on his asshole when he was done.

"Are you sure it's a good idea *now*?" asked Paul.

"Well, I don't think everyone wants to travel with me when my colon is filled to the brim. Yes, I'm sure, Daddy, I have to go," answered Scott, a little more huffy than usual.

"Okay, okay, but don't go too far," said Paul, a little embarrassed for even asking the question.

"I won't… geez!" said Scott as he marched away.

* * *

Jesus, Paul, are you my mother? thought Scott as he wandered a short distance from the camp into the fog. *Maybe you could come and wipe me, too*. Scott was difficult to embarrass, but there were some things that still got to him and this was one. He found a large tree that would do and went on the read the ill-fated sports section.

* * *

The group waited for Scott.

And waited.

"I know Scott takes his time, but this is getting ridiculous," said Deacon. They'd given him a lot of time and Deacon spoke out loud what everyone was thinking. Deacon and Scott went a long way back as friends and if anyone was going to comment in an awkward situation like this it was going to be him.

"I agree. Let's give him another minute, I already told him to hurry up. I'm sure he's pushing with all his might," said Paul. "I'll start the car. Maybe that'll get him going, I know it—oh, there he is."

They all were glad to see his shape begin to emerge from the fog.

"What are you talking about?" asked Deacon, who saw nothing.

The person that walked into the campsite and looked up at them wasn't Scott. It was an old man in a purple suit and cane. Ruffled white lace fell from his cuffs and collars and he wore a large top hat. Paul could make out the years on his face even through the mist. His large eyes were sunk deep into his head and his body and hands were slumped and frail. There was something very wrong with his smile. His teeth were pointed.

"Who the hell is that?" whispered Liv.

"What?" asked Jen looking around the camp. She couldn't see anything.

"It's only the mist, you guys, I can't see shit," said Deacon.

Paul turned around and grabbed the rifle from the back of the car. By the time he turned around again, the specter was gone.

"Just look away. It's gone for me, now," said Paul.

Liv and Wes rubbed their eyes. Anna buried her head into her arms and cowered into the back seat of the car. The vision now disappeared for all of them.

"Will someone please try to explain *that* to me," said Wes under his breath.

"You be careful with that gun in this mist, Paul. Putting a bullet through Scott would put a

damper on lunch," said Deacon.

"I don't like that one bit, man. How can half of us see it and half of us not? And why do you never see these things?" asked Paul.

"I don't know. I felt something was a little weird. I figure it's like those hidden pictures. I used to stare and stare and I could never get it," answered Deacon.

"I wish I was as immune to the mist as you seem to be," commented Liv.

"SCOTT!" yelled Paul loudly into the mist. "SCOTT!"

There was still no answer. Paul rushed to the front of the car and started it. He let it run for a minute before removing the keys. Only a wet silence greeted the death of the engine.

Deacon's deep voice now bellowed out his name with a sharp sense of panic. "SCOTT!"

They all closed their eyes and listened. There was a noise in the distance. It was him, or what sounded like him.

"Oh, Jesus," whispered Liv. "He's gone and gotten himself lost out there…."

* * *

Scott could hear the start of the car engine in the distance. He finished his business and left his impression on the face of the tennis star who'd won Wimbledon a few years before.

"Game. Set. Match," he giggled to himself. Scott got up and made his way back in the direction of the roar of the car. As he wandered back through the misty forest he noticed the trees were thicker than what he remembered on his way there.

Scott stopped and listened. He could hear their voices. He couldn't be more than fifty feet away. He struggled through the forest toward them, but something was wrong. He should have been in the clearing long ago, and he didn't remember having to fight his way through the trees on the way there. Scott felt his heart pound.

"No! No! No!" he said to himself as he continued to march through the nest of trees. He wasn't ready to shout for them. He knew he wouldn't hear the end of it if he got lost taking a shit. He knew he wouldn't let the guys hear the end of it if *they* ever did.

Gets lost taking a dump, and ends up walking off of a cliff....What a perfect way for Scott Armstrong to die, thought Scott. *I can imagine the eulogy.* He continued to fight his way through the trees toward the sound of the car. When the sound abruptly died his embarrassment began to turn to panic.

Visions from old horror films danced through Scott's head as he made his way through the forest, cold and alone. He would stop and listen hard but he could only hear a strange whispering in the distance. It had to be them. He made his way toward the source of the sounds, but then they would suddenly come from a completely different direction. Adrenaline flowed through his body. Panic was setting in.

"GUYS!" he yelled. "I'm out here! I think I'm lost…." His voice trailed off at the end. He listened for any response, but nothing came. He could still hear the whispering but Scott came to realize it wasn't his companions. It was either his imagination or the mist. Perhaps both. How far had he walked?

"They're gone, Scotty-boy," came a strange voice from out in the forest.

Scott let out a quiet moan.

"They left you, funny man," came the voice, now deeper and clearer.

Scott was dumbfounded. He'd seen all kinds of things in the mist before, a face in rock, the shape of a man, or a creature, that quickly disappeared with the rubbing of the eyes. But he had never been spoken to before. None of them had ever been spoken to before, so far as he knew.

"They wouldn't leave me," said Scott sternly, as much to himself, as to the voice in the mist.

Scott began to sweat. Was it getting hot in the heavy growth of the forest, or was his heart just pounding too hard? He raised his eyes and thought he could make out the sun, now only a pale circle

in the mist. He looked out among the trees and plants and expected to see a face, a man or a creature, but he saw nothing except for the shadows of the tree branches reaching upward. Branches like hands, reaching up to the sky in prayer. Or terror. The mist was disorienting him, and his heart thud faster.

"GUYS!" screamed Scott now with all his might. "HELP!"

"They're gone, Scotty boy…you're alone with me now…tell me a joke…."

"HELP!"

* * *

"Did you hear that?" asked Liv. She had the keenest senses in the group. She could spot a distant farmhouse from a hillside that most of them couldn't even make out after being pointed in the exact direction. She'd woken them up twice in the past only moments before they were attacked when her ears caught the sounds of the creatures sneaking into camp.

But she was not the only one who heard something. Lucky yelped from the back seat of the car at the noise, and Wes also thought he heard it.

"What if they're out there? Not the visions…the creatures," said Wes quietly as he tried to calm the dog so they could hear better.

"They probably can't see through this soup either," answered Deacon. He didn't sound too sure of himself.

"How are we gonna find him in this?" asked Paul. "We're gonna get lost out there as well."

Another sound echoed from out of the forest, and most of them heard this one. It was undoubtedly a scream, and Lucky again barked madly at the sound.

Deacon became restless. He grabbed his axe and paced. When another yell came from somewhere out in the forest he actually began to walk out toward the sound before both Jen and Paul stopped him.

"You can't walk out there, Deek, you'll end up no better than Scott. Think about it, man. We're gonna have two people to find," said Paul with his hand firmly on Deacon's shoulder.

"He could be dying out there. We gotta do something! He sees all that shit in this mist, worse than he ever lets on, I know it. I don't see the stuff like you do, it's best I go," argued Deacon. His anxiety over Scott was clear.

Another yell echoed out of the forest. Again the dog barked.

"You can't just walk out there. There's a fine line between being brave and being stupid, and you're about to cross it," argued Paul. Deacon, who was almost ready to go, stared at him angrily.

"Maybe you could take the dog with you, Deek," suggested Wes. "Yeah, take Lucky, maybe she can lead you to him!" The brilliance of Wes's suggestion grew even as he spoke.

"That's actually a pretty good idea," said Jen. "And we can call for her after you find Scott."

"Grab the leash," said Paul. There was a short argument as Paul insisted on joining Deacon in the search party. Jen suggested tying Paul and Deacon together as well, and they both agreed readily.

"Okay, some quick rules," said Paul as he tied. "Don't call for us until you hear us call for you. If you don't hear anything in say, twenty minutes, you can start to yell for us and make a racket, otherwise, if you're making noise before then the dog will just lead us right back here."

The remaining group members nodded in agreement, except for Anna, who still sat in the back seat of the car with her head buried in her arms. Her quiet sobs were all they would hear after Deacon and Paul departed.

"The other thing. Don't come out for us no matter what while this mist is about. *No matter what.* If we don't come back, wait until the fog lifts before you come and find us." Paul spoke as if he was the father of the four. "And I mean it. If Deek and I can't handle this then there isn't much you guys will be able to do…no insult meant there. There's no sense all seven of us—well, six anyway—wandering out there lost. Every time we split up it seems like bad things happen. Look where we are now."

They nodded in agreement with Paul. In dire situations like this no one argued with him.

Paul reached into the front of the car, grabbed the rifle and loaded it.

"Don't take that, man," said Deacon.

"Are you kidding me?" responded Paul.

"No. Think about it. You suddenly see something in the misty forest, panic, and put a bullet square through Scott's head."

"But how will defend ourselves?"

"I have my axe," answered Deacon. "But leave the gun here. If there is anything real out there, we're fucked anyway."

"Okay, okay," answered Paul. He grabbed Scott's knives instead, but he still felt naked without his gun.

"Alright you little mutt, let's see if this luck of yours continues," said Deacon as Lucky pulled them off into the mist.

* * *

Scott was starting to lose his mind. The voice continued to taunt him. It knew his secrets.

It knew him.

Scott smashed through the forest in desperation, cutting and scratching his face and hands and muttering, "Oh, my God," over and over again, as he made his way through the bramble of trees.

"Scotty…all alone…all alone…all alone…," taunted the voice that was growing louder and louder, along with the strange laughter in the background. It was almost like a child's, but faster and higher pitched. It was no child he wanted to meet.

Scott thought he had heard some yelling, and moved toward it, but there was nothing but empty silence in the heavy curtain of mist. His ankles and jacket were soaked as he brushed along the

dew-covered leaves and grass of the forest. Sweat poured from his body. He was covered in a sticky sap from the pines, and he could feel it on his hands and in his hair.

"The Creepers are out here, Scotty…they're hungry, too…so are the Skulls…and the Scorps… there's a pack of Fangs out here as well…that little girl you killed didn't fill them up!"

"SHUT UP!" Scott yelled. It was no use.

"We've even got a Giant Black that's got some bones to pick! Yours! It's mighty angry with you and your little friends…you're all alone, Scotty…all alone…."

Scott stopped and leaned against a tree trunk. *Jesus*, he thought, *I have to get a grip. What am I doing? How am I getting myself out of this? Is walking deeper and deeper into the forest helping anything?* There was no longer any doubt he was lost, and with that realization a rule he learned years earlier in Scouts came into his head: *When you're lost, don't move.*

Scott decided to stop and make his stand. He turned and called out the names of each group member with all his might. What he would give to see one of their faces again.

"They can't heeeeeaaarrrr yooouuuuu! Goodbye, Scotty…goodbye…."

* * *

Lucky pulled hard on the rope and led them quickly through the murk. They didn't know what the dog heard, what it was after, or even how the animal knew what they wanted of it. She stopped a few times to smell a tree, or a plant, but continued to lead the two of them on.

"Can you see that?" asked Paul.

"See what?" answered Deacon.

"Never mind," said Paul as he rubbed his eyes.

The path Lucky led Paul and Deacon down was uneven and treacherous. They stumbled slowly out of the clearings of the campsites and into the thick furs of the nearby forest.

"Ah, dude, I can smell something foul," said Paul waving his hand in front of his face. "It has got to be Scott, nothing else could smell that bad."

They stopped and both took turns yelling for him. Deacon's voice was becoming hoarse from yelling so loud. There was no response, but the dog still pulled on with a strange determination. Lucky seemed to know what she was doing, and where she was going.

"Paul, I think this dog is possessed," commented Deacon as Lucky pulled so tightly on the leash she choked and coughed.

"I know, and if she can find Scott I'll promise we won't eat her," said Paul. His comments about eating the dog sounded deadly serious. Most of the group thought he was joking but no one could completely tell for sure.

"Deacon, can you hear whispering in the background?"

"I don't know. I think I can hear something out there, and I can definitely see some weird shadows but I think it's just the mist. I've never breathed in this much before, or been in stuff this thick for this long. I think the best thing you can do is try not to look and try not to listen," answered Deacon. He said a similar speech when they'd asked him why he was so resistant to seeing the images in the mist. "If I can't see it or hear it, it can't be real. If it ain't real, it can't hurt you."

* * *

Scott sat on a log and wept. Tears and sweat ran down his cheeks and snot poured from his nose. He did his best to try to rub it off but it just kept flowing. The sleeves of his light green jacket were soaked.

"Scott…" continued the whispers.

Except this one was muffled.

"Scott!" said the voice again, but this time it was Paul's, a little hoarse, but Scott would

recognize that commanding tone anywhere.

"I'm here! I'm here!" yelped Scott with relief.

Lucky was the first to emerge out of the fog. Her large droopy ears and spotted pink tongue brought joy to Scott's heart. Paul appeared, followed by Deacon. They were relieved to have found each other.

"Christ, Scott, what happened?" asked Deacon after a quick embrace.

"Oh, man," croaked Scott. "I don't know. The mist. It tricked me. I heard voices."

"Well, calm down now, Scott, we're here," said Paul, clapping him on the back.

"How are we gonna get back?" asked Scott.

"We told them to give us twenty minutes and then start screaming for us. We were hoping the dog would hear the noise and lead us back," said Deacon.

"What if we're too far away?" asked Scott.

No one answered.

* * *

"How long has it been?" asked Jen as she paced back and forth.

"It's impossible to tell, Paul's got the watch, but it's been at least twenty minutes. I think maybe we should start," answered Liv.

"Let's give 'em a little longer," said Wes.

The rest of the group agreed. It had been a long and lonely wait as they sat wilting in the humidity of the mist. They had nothing to do but try their best to keep from staring out into the fog at the strange images that would appear. Jen described to them what she thought was an angry circus clown on a unicycle. Wes and Liv both saw what they thought was a hooded man peering at them from behind a tree. Anna remained huddled in the car.

It was the sound of Lucky's bark that brought them out of their own thoughts and back to the situation at hand. Even Anna's head rose from the back seat.

"Lucky, c'mon Lucky, we're right here," called Wes with joy.

Lucky emerged from the fog, but no one followed. A torn rope hung around her neck.

"Oh, Christ, they've lost the dog!" exclaimed Wes as he bent down to greet her.

They realized as the dog approached there was something in her mouth. Liv let out a terrified scream. It was a severed human hand.

The dog stopped and dropped the thing on the ground. She then sat down and looked up at them with her tongue hanging out one side of her mouth and what could only be described as a toothy grin. The animal whispered in a deep guttural voice: "They're gone…gone, gone, gone!"

Wes screamed, recoiled, and tripped backwards into the car. The back of his head smashed against the rim of the tire. Jen and Liv also screamed, as the dog continued barking the word "gone" at them.

"It's not real you guys, snap out of it!" yelled Anna. Out of all of them, it was her that shattered away the vision.

Jen dashed tears from her eyes. Lucky was gone, along with her bloody present. Wes looked up, rubbing his head, and now also saw nothing. It took Liv some time to find the courage to open her eyes. When she did, the dog was gone.

"I've never heard a vision speak before," said Wes, still half stunned.

"We have got to get out of here," said Liv slowly. They all agreed and called the names of the dog and the missing members. Even Anna got out of the car and began banging the trunk with the butt of the shotgun. They rattled metal poles, honked the car horn, and screamed until their voices cracked. If there was anything out in there in the forest, it would hear them.

* * *

The trio immediately stopped their conversation. They could hear echoes of the screams of their companions from somewhere in the distance.

"Can you guys hear that?" asked Scott.

"I sure can, man," answered Deacon, relieved. "Let's get out of here."

The voices were loud enough that Lucky wasn't even required to lead. Paul took a moment to join Scott to them with a small piece of the nylon rope.

They could identify the voices calling to them, and could hear each of their names being yelled, but they couldn't seem to get closer.

Suddenly, Wes's distant voice became abruptly louder and clearer than the others. "Deacon, give me a few more minutes with Jen before you come back, we're not done yet!"

Deacon stopped and looked back at Paul. He'd heard it too.

"What an asshole thing to say," said Deacon, sounding more angry than hurt.

"It's got to be the mist, man," Scott replied, patting Deacon on the shoulder.

"Yeah, I know. It's a good thing, too," Deacon growled.

The comments and insults worsened as they approached. Things were screamed that made them blush, or boil with anger. Only when Anna screamed that she had killed all of them with the shotgun and was about to turn it on herself did they stop to look at each other uncomfortably. The voices laughed, and continued yelling horrible things as the three of them struggled back through the thick forest.

And still they followed the sound of the voices.

"This is crazy. Why are we going toward those voices? We know it's not them. I think we're going the wrong way!" said Scott.

"Yeah, this doesn't feel right, Deek," agreed Paul. "It's the mist, it's messing with us…and I'm starting to feel woozy. I'm seeing and hearing things all over the place."

"But this doesn't happen to me, I don't see the things you guys see, it doesn't affect me like it does you guys," said Deacon, talking as much to himself as to Paul.

"It's never been this thick," observed Paul. "I feel like I'm on drugs or something. If it's this bad for me maybe it's starting to wear a little on you too. You can hear those voices; would Wes, Jen, or Liv ever say stuff like that? Anna's scared of her own shadow, how could she scream something like that out to us?"

Deacon stopped and listened. Paul continued.

"It's not right. We shouldn't be following these voices. When they started they sounded like they were fifty feet away, we must've gone five hundred feet by now."

Deacon grunted in agreement.

"These voices are messing us up. I say we just follow the dog. Maybe she can smell them, maybe she can't hear the voices. I don't know, but she brought us to Scott, so I say we trust her," Paul argued with conviction, and he won both of them over.

Deacon bent down to the dog. "Okay, take us home, girl. Take us back to the car. Back to Wes. Take us back to Wes." The dog licked Deacon's face and began to pull them away in almost the opposite direction.

"Come back, Deacon. Why are you leaving me here," pleaded Jen's voice. "I'm all alone, they've all left me!"

"I'm alone too, Deacon," purred Liv's voice, "and I'm the one you really want."

Over time the voices changed from their friends back to the strange voice that taunted Scott. It was a voice that they would never forget.

"You are all going to die! Die! Die! Die!" it repeated in threes. "Alone, Alone, Alone."

Deacon wasn't prepared for this. He had always prided himself on not seeing the things the others saw. Subconsiously he felt his mind, his body, possibly both were simply stronger than theirs. But now even he was beginning to see shapes emerge in the mist as he walked and it terrified him.

Tree branches looked like hands grabbing for him. There were faces in tree trunks, and the roots below him resembled pulsing veins as they crisscrossed the pathway.

Still Lucky led on, and it was a relatively short time until they once again could smell Scott's bathroom break.

"I never thought I would be so happy to smell shit," said Paul.

"Me, neither," agreed Deacon.

The stench brought hope back into their hearts, and it was in that clearing that they heard their names being shouted. They stopped and listened to the voices carefully. It was plain screams for them. No awful comments; it was really them.

Lucky heard the shouts immediately and made a bee line toward them. They were not far now.

* * *

Wes was losing his voice from the screaming, and decided to join Anna in smacking the hood of the car when he saw the shape of Lucky re-emerge from out of the mist. They all stopped dead at the sight of the puppy, but this time Deacon, Paul, and Scott also appeared out of the fog. After a few moments of hugging and sighs of relief, they quickly packed up the car.

"What the hell happened out there?" asked Jen as Deacon hurriedly put the axe in the trunk.

"We need to get out of here now. I saw things out there, Jen. I heard things, too. We need to get out of here. This place, or this mist, or today is evil. We need to leave." Deacon as he scrambled into the car. He was visibly shaken.

The car started without trouble and they slowly rolled from out of their campsite onto the thinly paved road that brought them there. They found their way back onto the highway and after only five minutes of travel the mist had dissipated. They slowly travelled down the highway toward Banff.

Chapter 13 – The Twinkie Twins

Wesley David – Entry 12A

I feel awful today.

They say the number after 13 is unlucky. I say we need as much luck as we can get—so I've changed my entry number: 12A.

Who are "They" anyway?

The road goes on, even after the ups and downs, but we sure saw a deep dark down today. Scott, our patron saint of stupidity, got lost out in the fog while taking a dump. A shit—of all the things that could go wrong. If it wasn't for our Lucky I don't know how, or if, we would have even found him. There's something about this dog (right now snuggled against my feet). I mean, she's no Benji, or Lassie, or even Scooby Doo, but this is one smart puppy. I don't care how hungry we get, or what Paul may joke about, after today's events there is no way we will eat this dog. She's earned her place. What a load of shit his threats are anyway, like Paul could actually take a knife to the throat of a helpless young dog. How hungry would you have to be? If we could kill and eat Lucky, the next thing you know we will be killing and eating each other.

Feeling as awful as I do, I don't have it nearly as bad as Deacon. His time in the thick mist chasing after Scott has put him on his ass. The mist seems to affect him so much less than the rest of us when we are in it, yet so much more when we are out.

* * *

It was early in the afternoon when they came across the first traffic of their journey. Paul was daydreaming and beginning to doze off a little as he drove. The incredibly slow pace they travelled at

to conserve gas made even the sharp mountain turns seem gentle and monotonous. Scott, who was staring dumbly into the distance from the middle of the backseat, was the first to see it.

"Whoa…guys, is that a *truck*?" asked Scott, not sure if it was real or another trick of the mist. It was light in the air now but sometimes that was all it would take.

"Yeah, I see that too," answered Paul. "Anyone else?"

Everyone answered yes, including Deacon, who lifted the damp towel off his bloodshot eyes to peek. Even though Deacon had seen and heard things in yesterday's mist, they still agreed if Deacon saw it, it was real.

"I see it. Pass the shotgun up here," said Deacon, who painfully removed the towel from his clenched eyes and rubbed his temples.

The truck turned out to be a full sized semi. It shared the same meandering pace. As it approached they could see the American rebel flag painted over the front grill. The truck had seen some action, but it was not in nearly as badly battered as their car. Along the sides of the rig were long deep scratches and many large dents. Dark black blood spattered the old confederate flag.

"Oh man, that thing could turn us into a can of sardines," said Scott whose words mirrored the concern in all of their minds.

"I know, and I don't think we'll have much of a shot of outrunning it in an old piece of shit like this, either," said Paul becoming even more concerned as the truck approached.

"Do you think they're marauders?" asked Liv.

"Yeah, they could be, but you never know, I suppose," answered Paul. "They might think we're marauders."

"Aren't we?" asked Wes.

Paul did not bother to answer the question. The truck continued to approach steadily. There was no way the rig hadn't spotted them—likely it was aware of them well before they were aware of it, as the driver sat much higher.

"What do we do, then?" asked Deacon still struggling to keep his eyes open. They were like little slits in his face and his forehead crumpled over his eyes. It was clear he, at least, was in no shape for a fight.

"I guess we just play it by ear. I mean, what do cars usually do when they drive by each other? Nothing, I suppose. I'll try to drive by, maybe give a little wave." Paul was thinking out loud as he did so often. "If they try to run us off the road then I guess I'll do all I can to get away."

"Seems like a good enough plan to me," said Deacon, placing the moist towel back over his eyes with a sigh.

As the large white rig approached they became more and more uneasy. Their concerns only grew as the mighty truck flashed its headlights and honked its horn.

"What do they want? Why can't we just go by?" asked Paul to himself. "Wes, load the rifle and pass it up here."

Paul could now see the driver's arm waving out the window; he wanted them to stop.

"Oh, Christ, what do I do?" asked Paul as the rig approached. Deacon, who again removed his towel when the honking began, looked at Paul with his clinched eyes and gave him a clueless shrug.

"Forget them, what could a guy in a Dixie rig possibly have to offer us, let's just go by," said Scott.

"What if he needs our help?" asked Jen.

There was no time to argue as the rig moved into the middle of the road, preventing their passage. The highway shoulders were undersized in the mountains, and to try and sneak by they risked a tumble down a three hundred foot drop into the valley below. The other side offered even fewer options, a small shoulder, and a solid rock face. They were trapped now and if the truck was going to smash them it would. They had no chance of escape, as there was no way they could turn around without being run down.

"Deacon, maybe you should give the shotgun to Scott. Can you aim in this condition?" asked

Paul as he readied the rifle.

"Yes," came the terse reply.

Suddenly from outside of the driver's window of the truck a large human arm reached out and gave them the peace sign. Instinctively Paul returned the gesture. It was a positive sign, but the large truck still blocked their passage. Both vehicles came to a stop fifty feet from each other.

"One of us should go out there and talk to them. Any volunteers?" asked Paul.

Wes looked up at the great truck and its driver. He appeared to have a large beard but it was difficult to tell as sunlight gleamed off the rig's windshield. He spoke up.

"Let me out to talk to them. I suppose you two can cover me. Deacon, you better be able to see straight. I'd like to stay bullet free."

"I'll shoot my very best if it comes to that," answered Deacon, still talking with a great deal of effort.

Wes opened the passenger door and stepped out, instantly followed by Lucky, pouncing off the seat onto the highway below. The dog quickly bounded toward the short grass on the shoulder.

Wes half yelled, half whispered, "Lucky…get back here!…Lucky!"

The dog was sniffing an area and did her business as she stared at Wes who continued his whisper-scream. Wes looked up into the rig at the faces of a man and a woman, both wearing big smiles.

"Nice one, Wes, way to make us look real tough, man," said Scott to him from inside the car.

Wes walked over to the dog, grabbed her angrily by the scuff and tossed her into Scott's lap in the backseat. The door of the rig opened and a man stepped out. He had a long scraggily beard that must have been growing for a very long time. It was the first time any of them, except Paul, had seen such a fat man in a very long time. The man seemed to be struggling to keep a smile off his large round face.

"Mary mother! He's huge!" said Jen under her breath.

"It's like the guy from ZZ-Top ate the other guy from ZZ-Top," said Scott, who was also stunned by the man's size.

Wes looked like a runt next to him. Even Deacon only made up half of the man.

Wes approached him and they shook hands. His fingers were like coils of sausage. Wes, whose fear of the man seemed to evaporate, turned around to the car in a very immature fashion with a "get a load of this guy" look. He puffed his cheeks and gave a smile before turning back around.

"Oh, Wes, grow up," sighed Jen in the car.

"It's good to meet you folks, we haven't seen barely any cars on the road, but for a few military and the occasional person since we came into Alberta," said the fat man whose voice matched his size. It was hoarse and deep, almost like Barry White with laryngitis.

"You're the first traveler we've met since we picked this baby up a few days ago," said Wes, pointing at the car, realizing how incredibly smashed up and pathetic their vehicle really looked after their encounter with the Giant Black. Wes almost felt embarrassed.

"My name is Doug, Doug Parks, nice to meet you, son," said the huge man with a slight southern drawl.

"Yes, nice to meet you too….Oh, I'm Wesley David."

"That's my wife Brenda in the rig there. It's just me and her. I can see you're traveling with a pretty good sized group, huh?"

"Oh yeah, we're like a can of sardines in this thing," replied Wes, pointing to the car.

The giant man threw up his head and let out a great cackle that startled Wes. He grabbed his belly as it shook. "Oh, that's funny, son! That's funny! My wife was just saying that's what you looked like to her."

Wes again turned back to the car trying to hide his face. This time he seemed ready to explode with laughter.

"Would someone go out there who can talk to this guy like an adult," pleaded Jen.

Scott moved to get out.

"Jesus Christ, not you!" barked Jen.

Scott shrugged and sat back in his seat without a word.

Paul turned to Scott and rolled his eyes, gave his rifle to Jen and got out of the car.

"Hi there," said Paul as he approached. "It's nice to meet you, but you've scared us a little, stopping in the middle of the road like that."

"You'll be glad I did, son," said the man seriously. "I thought you were gonna try to drive by without stopping. I couldn't send anybody down that road without a warnin' first—hell, not even my ex." The large man stroked his beard anxiously.

"Yeah, I guess we have a few warnings for you too. I never thought of stopping to tell you though—a rig like yours could go through hell and back," said Paul.

"Well, that's what's up ahead for ya, we barely got through it ourselves," said the man who seemed suddenly lost in memory. "Maybe we should stop and have a bite together, huh? I know it's kinda hard to trust a stranger these days, but I think we could help each other out."

Paul looked at the man and took in what he was saying. Years earlier he would have distrusted him with his gnarled hair and beard. The man's lips and teeth were yellow from tobacco chewing. His arms were covered with tattoos and he wore a black leather Harley Davidson cap and a long untucked T-shirt with a big eagle on it. Paul realized he probably didn't look like the most trustworthy character himself. He hadn't shaved or even bathed for a couple of days, besides washing his hands and face.

"Sure, but I would appreciate it if we could drive past you and park, blocking the road has still got me a little spooked, to be honest," said Paul.

"Yeah, yeah, no problem, then," said Doug, who slung his huge body back into the rig and moved it off to the side of the road.

"Wow, he can move pretty fast for a lard ass," observed Scott, after Paul got in to move the car.

"He seems like a pretty decent guy to me, I mean, what did you expect, a business suit?" asked Paul.

"Good luck finding that much material these days," joked Scott.

"Didn't you used to be fat, Scott?" asked Liv with a smile.

"Well, not fat-fat. I prefer *substantial*," he said loftily.

Deacon turned and pulled the towel from his bloodshot eyes and raised his eyebrows at Scott. He and Jen knew Scott before The Arrival.

"Alright, alright, I was fat, okay. But I wasn't anywhere close to that guy," huffed Scott. "I can't believe someone could stay like that these days. They must have been transporting a truckload of Twinkies and abandoned the trailer."

"It is little surprising I guess, maybe they did have a trailer," said Paul. "But they seem like nice people and we're gonna stop for lunch together. They have some info on what's up ahead, and I think we should warn 'em about the dangers down the road if they're heading toward Hinton."

The memory of the event unsettled them. Even Scott's smartass comments died while they unpacked their food and prepared a scanty lunch.

Doug and Brenda Parks may have been a bit rougher around the edges than Ted and Sara Williams but they were just as kind and generous. Brenda was nearly the size of her husband, only she was significantly shorter and it was a struggle for her to even get out of the rig. Scott and Wes erupted in barely restrained hysterics at the sight of Doug trying to haul her down and it only got worse through lunch. The giggling became contagious as they ate, so much so, that only Deacon with his headache did not have to struggle at one point or another from laughing out loud. By the end of lunch Scott's eyes were as red as Deacon's, and when Doug Parks asked what was wrong, Scott claimed to have a headache too.

There was no comparison between what the Parks brought to the table and what the group did, even though Jen was sure they shared their best, and did not dare show the dog food they stored for

emergencies. She brought out pie filler, dried meats, a can of beans, and even some of the crackers stored for special occasions, but she was outdone each time by Brenda, who was more than happy to share. They too had dried meats, along with a huge stash of pasta and soup cans. They also had packaged treats including a bag of (stale) potato chips and Twinkies. The sight of the Twinkies brought the giggling level to a new height, and even Deacon couldn't help but try to hide the smile on his face.

They ate well, and in the end the Parks only wanted to try the moose meat that the group offered to see what it tasted like. They were given a free meal and it was greatly appreciated as it was a sacrifice for the Parks, as well stocked as they were, to share with all seven of them. The Parks were from Nevada, with Doug originally hailing from Kansas. They were truckers who abandoned their home near Reno when the looting and attacks became too much. They were fortunate they had stored large amounts of food in their cellar. Brenda admitted that she was paranoid about storing food after the September 11th attacks, and she had made Doug fill their basement with everything they would ever need.

"Costco was my home away from home. I guess that paranoia paid off, though," said Brenda in her high pitched voice. "Otherwise we could be skinny by now!"

Doug again threw his head in the air and let out a giant cackle. Having them laugh at their own weight killed the group's inside joke.

After they cleaned up, which consisted of washing plates and utensils and throwing garbage into the ditch, Paul and Doug settled into a more serious conversation.

"So you stopped us because we need to know what's up ahead. It worries me but I appreciate it, and I may be able to give you some advice too," said Paul, fully stuffed. He hadn't eaten pasta for months, and only Scott ate with a more voracious appetite.

"Yes, yes, some nasty business up ahead. But, I suppose nasty business wouldn't be hard to find in whatever direction you go. World's gone all to hell," replied Doug with a sigh. "We're lucky to

even be here, and we wouldn't be if I didn't have a rig like this. A car like yours might never make it." He paused, then said slowly, "Tunnels. There's this tunnel up ahead, cut through the steep parts of the mountains. It's infested with 'em. And I mean infested. I felt like I was driving through an ant hill."

"Oh man, I forgot about those tunnels," replied Paul. He travelled on the highway between Jasper and Banff many times since he was a kid. They all had, but the thought of those tunnels, and the danger they might pose, had not even crossed his mind.

"I'm glad I stopped ya, then. The first tunnel was nothin', passed right through without sight nor sound. So I never considered the danger when we drove into the next one."

"We sure didn't," added Brenda.

"Yeah. So we're halfway though the tunnel when suddenly the truck's covered in Pinchers," continued Doug.

"Pinchers?" interrupted Wes. "I haven't heard of those before."

"You know, they look kinda like big cockroaches with pinchers for hands."

"Oh, you mean Scorps! That's what we call them," replied Wes.

"Well, whatever you want to call 'em, they're nasty little buggers," said Doug. "And persistent, too. On the windshield, the hood, the roof. I thought we were goners. One even managed to put a claw through the passenger's window. Piss me off! I don't how we're gonna fix it fer winter….Anyway, I damn near deafened Brenda tryin' to shoot the thing. Brenda's got some mean cuts, too. I'm a damn fool, anyhow. Instead a slowin' down in those tunnels I shoulda sped up. Goin' slow let them get all over us. I smashed my rig pretty good getting them off, as you can probably see. Ain't nothing compared to your ride, though."

"Yeah, she got pretty beaten up…we had an encounter as well. Pretty nasty one, too. I don't know what you call them down in Nevada, Doug, but here, we call them a Giant Black," said Paul.

Doug stared at them, confused, and then opened his mouth in awe. "You mean the Horned Devil? Oh, Jesus in heaven. You're lucky to even be here right now. You mean there's one of them up

ahead of us? I may as well turn around right now and go back through that tunnel naked."

"We gave it a good run for its money. I don't think it will give you too much trouble after what it found with us. At least I'd hope so," said Paul. "Especially in that ride."

Paul went on to tell them all about their encounter. He described the scream and the terror. He told them about the trailer across the road and how it was a trap. He also told Doug what side to take when driving past the trailer. Jen went on to warn them both about the thick mists they'd gone through, the hallucinations and losing Scott.

"Oh yeah, we've been through those before," said Doug. "We had a week back in Nevada when it settled in real thick. Damn near killed each other, didn't we honey? It was nasty. I talked to my dead Pa on the last day of it. We were both seeing things like crazy, far worse than the usual."

"So, how are things down south, Doug?" asked Deacon.

"Not so good. Where there's more people there seems to be more of those buggers. We're putting up a pretty good fight, though. Driving through the towns you can see smoke from the piles of dead being burned. Piles of theirs and even ours, in some cases, I'm afraid. When we started to get into as much trouble with the people as with the creatures we knew it was time to leave. They say down there Canada is safe, and Canada is empty. When we got here all we heard was Canadians saying they heard the States was safer and under control. Truth is, I don't think anywhere is safe anymore. Except maybe Utah. Some scary shit goin' on down there. You drive though Salt Lake City and there isn't a creature in sight. The street lights still work. Weird fires burning everywhere too, fires that don't seem to die. People still walk the streets, except they're wearin' funny robes and there are signs about this Isack all over the place. They say he crossed over and came back with funny powers. They also say he's trained his followers with these magic powers. It's said that it works because of this mist and they use it to fight off these devils. Hah! Some say that nut actually has these creatures working under him. Some say he's a messiah that's going to take the world back and make it all right again. I'm sure you've heard all this before. You turn on the radio, even up here, and there are stations

only about him. I never been that type a man though, never been religious, never bought into that crap."

"Doug!" said Brenda, scoldingly.

"Wha'! Oh…sorry, I don't mean to insult you kids if yer religious. Or if you're headin' toward this Isack fellow. I mean it ain't my cup'a tea, s'all."

"No worries, Doug, we're not headed to Utah, we're off to the west coast," said Wes.

"Seems as good a place as any, I suppose," said Doug. "We're headed up to Fort McMurray. My brother used to ship oil equipment up there. He told us about some cabins on a lake south of town. We thought it would be a great place to go. Now that we're here I guess we'll have to. No turnin' back now. No turning back…."

They spent an hour with the Parks after lunch talking and discussing the events around the world. They were good company, but they, too, were eager to get back on the road. The encounter was good for the group, it allowed them to relax and let out some of the tension from the night before. As they packed up, said their goodbyes, and thanked each other, Doug pulled Deacon and Paul aside.

"If yer gonna go through—the tunnels, that is—go fast. Don't hesitate, and definitely don't try to turn around once yer already in," his voice was intensely serious for the first time since they'd met and it was almost frightful coming from the immense man. "I see something in you kids…I like ya… well, we like ya. I could swear I've met you before, but I know that's impossible. Brenda thinks yer special. Don't ask me what it's all about. And I haven't met a stranger I've liked in a while. You take good care of yourselves."

Both Paul and Deacon were surprised by the large man's show of emotion. He seemed almost ready to burst into tears.

"I don't want to pull any punches. I didn't want to say it out loud in front of those girls you're with, but I've got to tell you. You're headed into hell," said Doug.

Deacon and Paul both swallowed at exactly the same the time.

"If you hit the same trailer, and the same patch of mist that we passed through…then so are you," said Paul in reply.

The three men stood together for a moment, not knowing whose position they would rather be in.

"Well, regardless, Brenda wanted me to give you this," said Doug, handing them a heavy bag. It contained an assortment of canned goods. "It's mostly some pasta that we could spare. I know your funny man, Skip there, likes it."

Paul made a weak attempt to not accept the gift but Doug would not take no for an answer. Paul knew they needed the food, badly, and he quickly accepted the gift gratefully.

The two large strangers loaded themselves back into the semi, with Brenda requiring a great deal of help from her husband to boost up her large frame. Wes and Scott again broke out in barely contained laughter. After the hospitality the couple had shown them, Jen and the other girls were not pleased to see them laughing, and showed it with their glares. Doug hopped into the truck after successfully getting Brenda loaded in and turned and looked at them all for a moment from his high window. He spoke.

"Don't fear the passage through the tunnel, and into the world beyond. Something tells me your destiny, and maybe all our futures, lie there."

They all stood dumbfounded as Doug started the large motor and slowly drove off. His words exactly echoed those of Sara Williams'.

Chapter 14 - The Tunnel

Wesley David – Entry # 14.

Now I can't be sure, but something strange is going on. The first thing bothering me is how willing people are to help us. Ted and Sara Williams, Doug and Brenda Parks, even that George Wilson guy that Paul disliked so much. They seem to be going out of their way to help us out—I still can't believe we got both the gas and the dog for that bottle of rum. Secondly, the coincidences. It's hard to point them all out, or to remember them all, but it's been small things since we have been traveling together, like unlocked doors, useful items, and timely encounters. But mostly, what has me thinking this way is how the words Doug Parks said to us today mirrored the note from Sara Williams. Almost exactly. "Don't be afraid to travel through the tunnel, to the world beyond." He even mentioned destiny. Maybe there really is something special about us; maybe we do have some larger purpose to fulfill, but I suppose that there is also the real possibility that people are screwed up these days.

We're all glad that we stopped and talked to the Parks. Their advice might save our lives, but their food has definitely filled our stomachs. It was quite a haul they left us. It should last us at least a few days. We just ate, and Scott is already dying to tear open a can of Chef Boyardee. I can see him rubbing his hair and his hands nervously, like he's preparing to rob a liquor store. Those Parks were quite the characters; their presence and appearance brightened our mood. They were good people.

We're still heading toward it though, a tunnel filled with deadly creatures. It's crazy, but I guess no crazier than turning around. I'm looking forward to a quiet day of travel before we get to the tunnel. We're already using up the gas—a little over half a tank left. We need to take it easy to make sure we have enough juice to pass through that tunnel. Otherwise, it's going to be one interesting hike through the darkness.

* * *

Liv examined herself in the rear view mirror. Her eyes were sunk into her head. They still held that cold green that always grabbed the boys' attention, but they were older now. She could see small lines formed in the corners and there were dark bags beneath. She'd moved from slender to skinny and her once-thick hair was lank and thin. It came out in clumps when she ran her fingers through it. The other girls had the same problem. She was only twenty-three, but felt, and looked, like she was going on forty. How she longed for a week back at home in her old bed, a nice warm bath with epsom salts, a few scented candles, and one of her mom's romance novels. And a cigarette, God, her kingdom for a cigarette. This constant traveling was not in her character, they all knew that, but she put up a good face. A hell of a lot better than Anna did, anyway, that much was for sure. And now they were slowly headed toward a tunnel filled with these creatures. The creatures that took both her brother and her father. The creatures that they spent months trying to avoid in the backwoods like lost souls. It was madness, but the other option was turning around. Turning around and heading back into the mist, back toward the beast that blocked the road, and back toward the graves of her family.

* * *

Scott had only one thing on his mind. The pasta. The warm, soft, stuffed ravioli sat so close. Covered with a rich tomato sauce and filled with lightly flavored beef. He was salivating more than Lucky did when they cooked. He dreamed about taking a can for himself. Snatching it while no one looked. He could hide it inside some newspapers and sneak away telling them that nature was calling. He could bring a knife and claim it was for protection. He could crack the tin and eat it all. No sharing, no courtesy. He could taste it, and imagined a full mouthful. He could feel the bolus of food slide down his throat into his famished stomach. He would do it. There was enough. They could each have

their own, Scott just wanted his share. When would they ever come across a stash like this again?

* * *

Paul was worried. He locked his hands on the steering wheel as he drove. Why the hell did Doug say that? So perfectly? It was no coincidence…or was it? How many times had he picked up the phone and the person he was going to call was on the line without even a ring, at that exact instant? How many times had he and Ryan said the exact same thing at the exact same time? Coincidences happened. He remembered a story about a guy who'd been struck by lightning seven times. Lottery winners who had hit the jackpot three times. But Paul couldn't dismiss it. Deacon saw it. He knew Wes saw it. The rest of them suspected it on one level or another. Something was going on.

* * *

Deacon was again stretched out in the front seat with a cold towel over his eyes. He'd been very quiet with the Parks. He left Paul to deal with it all. Deacon didn't like doing that, but it was nice that he could, and Paul wasn't so bad. Deacon had no doubt Paul only had the best interest of the group in his heart, even if he sometimes tried to push his opinions on the rest of them too hard. Deacon lifted the wet towel from his eyes to see where they were and a sharp pain shot into his head. He wanted the headache to go away. He wanted all the scabs, bruises, and scratches to go away. And he wanted the goddamn face of Jessica Grainger to go away most of all.

* * *

Wes continued to write in his notebook. He watched the jagged snowcapped mountains slowly

pass by. He tried to start a game of geography, but no one was interested. So he returned to his writing but found he had little to say.

* * *

Jen was scared. She was terrified of where they were headed and what they would find when they got there. It was one thing for them to have to react when they were attacked but it was another thing entirely to purposefully encounter, rather than avoid, these creatures. She'd never seen a Scorp before, only drawings and pictures on the TV before it died, along with everything else electronic. Deacon had, he killed one with his brother—or so he claimed. It was not unlike him to embellish a story here and there to try and keep up with Paul. Men were like that sometimes. Jen looked back to see Liv admiring at her gorgeous eyes in the rearview mirror. A jolt of jealousy passed through her.

Women were like that sometimes, too.

* * *

Anna was tired. She was weak. Even the meal with the Twinkie Twins did not alleviate the sadness and pain in her heart. Was she being too hard on herself? Probably. Maybe this trip into the tunnel would give her sweet release from this nightmare. She thought about it often. Having the teeth of one of these creatures pierce her throat and bring on a sudden death. She'd imagined dying before: darkness, and then a bright comforting light. Her mom would wave from inside, with her famous wide smile and open arms. Anna grunted. *With my luck I'll be the sole survivor. Left to wander through this mountainous nightmare on my own.*

* * *

Each creeping minute passed into an hour and each hour passed into the day. They travelled forty kilometers through the high passes and steep valleys of the rugged mountain highway. On a couple of occasions Paul was able to put the car into neutral and glide down the steep hills with a good amount of speed. When he would put the automatic transmission back into drive the whole car would creak and moan, like a child not wanting to get up for school. It worried them, especi

ally Scott, and he stopped doing it after the first couple of hills. If the old car died on them in the tunnel they were as good as gone. They realized they had a lot invested in this car. A metal cage built before any of them were born.

They stopped for the night in the exact same spot Doug and Brenda Parks stayed after their encounter in the tunnel. The stop was a quiet and rocky roadside turnout complete with government built restrooms. The girls were thrilled and all of them took the time to refresh themselves inside.

The men's bathroom was a dank place complete with the standard broken mirrors and was lit by a large plastic sunlight clogged with dead bugs. It reeked of shit and piss but that was probably to be expected on any normal day even ten years before. Deacon and Scott looked at some the bathroom graffiti that was written on the walls and carved into the bathroom partitions. The usual sexual comment or crude joke, even the simple "fuck you" had been replaced by prophecies of doom. *The Arrival - you'll live no more, get under your bed, and lock your* door, said one. *Jesus will come!* said another. *Only Isack can save us!* said many. *Don't fear the passage – R.E.,* said one, which Deacon pointed out to all the guys with a shrug. Some remarks were creepy. After reading, *Satan was here,* Deacon became uneasy. After reading, *Look behind you!* he decided to leave.

The women's bathrooms were similar for the most part but with far less graffiti. Even after the world ends some rules, like the symbols of men and women on the doors, had to be obeyed, and the male vandals stayed out. The girls did their best to wash their faces and untangle their hair in front of what remained of the wall mirrors. As Anna combed knots out of her hair and pulled out what seemed like hundreds of strands, she stared at herself. She felt her face looked as shattered as the mirror she

gazed into. It was a nice change for the girls to sit down on a toilet seat again. Liv actually enjoyed it so much she had Deacon come in with his axe and hack it off for her. Propped up with a couple of sturdy logs she argued that it would work like a charm. Liv could care less about the embarrassment of her request. They would all thank her when the dandelions didn't tickle their assholes anymore.

Paul had the foresight to load some firewood into the car for the trek through the rocky heights of the mountains. There were always trees nearby, but they were small, wet pines that would not burn unless thrown into an already searing fire. Starting a fire usually required some of their newspaper to get going. They made an effort through the months of their farmhouse pillaging to be sure to collect as many lighters, match packs, and newspapers as they possibly could, and they always had Liv's seemingly endless Zippo to fall back on when the wood was wet. It didn't take long for them to start a small flame crackling in a circle of rocks built by travelers a long time before.

"I've got to go, man. Can you pass me some of that paper?" Scott asked Paul as the flames began to take.

"Yeah, no problem."

Paul passed him a classified section without a glance. Scott took it and began to walk away from the camp.

"Dude!" said Paul. "Why don't you just use the toilets here? I'm not into forming a search party tonight."

A few members of the group chuckled.

Scott stopped and looked at the small bathrooms close by. The Raviolli can he'd hidden in the newspaper suddenly felt heavy. Where could he get rid of the can when he was done in that shithole? He suddenly felt guilty and agitated.

"Oh, yeah...I, uh...I guess, yeah," said Scott. *What am I doing? I'm not eating this, no way...I'll spend a few minutes in there and put the can back with the rest. What was I thinking*? He turned and headed toward the dingy washrooms.

"Oh, and Scott," said Paul again. "Try not to get lost in there."

A few more of the group listening to the conversation chuckled.

"Yeah, right, Paul. Funny ha-ha," answered Scott in his best acting voice. He was scared now. Like when he used to lift chocolate bars from the corner store. The same surging feeling of fear and excitement was bursting beneath his phony veil of casualness. Scott felt relief as he pulled open the door to the bathroom.

"Oh, Scott, just one more thing," said Paul.

"Jesus, what is it, Colombo?" answered Scott, now honestly annoyed.

"I hope you're taking that can in there to read the ingredients," said Paul, looking at him seriously.

Scott stopped and stared. He could feel the rush of blood into his cheeks and suddenly he did have to shit. Everyone looked over at him with astonishment.

Busted.

"Yeah, I was…I wanted to, I just…." He looked at all of them one by one. Once again he was the focus of the group's attention. Again he was the fool. "I just…I just…was going to try and steal food from you guys," he answered acceptingly. Scott walked back from the bathroom and set the can down on the hood of the car for all to see. "I'm…I'm sorry." It came out hoarse. A lump in the back of his throat exploded and his eyes began to water. He felt pure embarrassment. Beyond anything he had felt before, worse than getting lost the day before, worse even in high school when his pants split in gym and everyone called him "Farley" for the rest of the term. "Farley" because he was fat and funny.

"I just wanted it real bad," said Scott as they looked at him. He was crying now. Full out. It was becoming an awkward moment for all of them.

"Whoa, whoa, Scotty…he was only kidding, man. We knew you were gonna dive into that stuff as soon as we stopped. You didn't have to sneak it, though…I mean, we're not starving…yet… but it's no big deal," said Deacon trying to save a little face for his friend. There was a quiet pause as

everyone took in the situation. "C'mon, guys, right?"

"Oh, yeah, it's not like you could keep Scott's fat ass from a tin of Boyardee," joked Wes jumping on Deacon's cue to try to lighten up the situation. None of them needed another member to feel guilty and out of place. They already had enough of that from Anna, besides, Scott was usually the one who raised their spirits. "No big deal, Scott, I've seen you salivate at the sight of deer droppings."

Scott smiled tremulously. Glistening snot ran down his nose. He was breathing hard and they could see mist forming from his nostrils in the cold. He looked like he'd just murdered his parents.

"Yeah, Scott," added Paul. "I was only kidding. Don't worry about it. Next time just do it out in the open. That goes for all us. Right?"

Everyone agreed. After standing there for a few more uncomfortable moments Scott left toward the bathrooms to spend some time alone. They let him.

"That was a little weird, huh?" asked Wes to Deacon.

"A little snakey but what can ya do? It's Scott. He's learned his lesson, I think," said Deacon.

"The shitting thing and then this. Man. All of his trouble has something to do with food in one form or another," said Wes.

Deacon laughed quietly. "I suppose. Look at you, funny man, maybe you should take over the class clown position."

"I can imitate, but never duplicate," sighed Wes.

* * *

It was the first autumn night that the cold was unbearable. They were at a very high altitude, and a chill blew from the mountain tops through the camp. The fire was there to provide light and cook their food throughout the summer; but now its main purpose was as a source of heat. All seven of

them crowed around it, including Scott, who'd calmed down, or just become too cold to care. He spent almost half an hour in the washroom until he built up enough courage to face them again, and when dinner was served he politely refused any of the pasta that was cooked. Jen tried her best to make him have some, but Scott refused, and instead only drank water and chewed on a small wooden stem. It was his own way of punishing himself, and they let him do it without too much of a fuss. He moped under a blanket with Liv and Wes and added little to the evening conversation.

"It is cold up here. I don't know how I'm gonna sleep tonight. Probably won't get a wink," muttered Paul. "We should be ready for an early morning, you can all sleep on the drive."

"Are we gonna hit the tunnel tomorrow, Paul?" asked Liv quietly.

"I can't say for sure, but I think we will. That's another reason I won't sleep tonight."

A chill went though all of them. When Paul showed fear like that, it was upsetting.

"It's crazy to try to go through that tunnel," said Anna. "I know it doesn't mean much coming from me, but it is."

A quiet moment went by as they took in her comment.

"I don't think turning around is an option," said Paul. "C'mon, Anna. Driving back through the mist seems just as dangerous to me. We got lucky that we didn't all get lost with Scott. I guess it may have cleared up by now, but we don't know that. What I do know for sure is that tonight is going to feel like a hot summer day if we're still around here in January.

"Can we go around it?" asked Jen.

"I guess we'll have to judge that when we get there," replied Paul. "But not likely, and it will mean abandoning the car. We're going slowly, but we're putting a lot more distance behind us now than we would on foot. The purpose of those tunnels is to go through the steep and rugged terrain, so it won't be easy going around it. That car has taken us through some tough spots. I know it seems reckless going into a place full of Scorps, but I don't see that we have a choice."

They didn't either, and even Anna knew it. They slept uneasily, and many of them stayed up

late by the fire and watched the stars and the satellites float above. Paul huddled by the flames all night. He dozed off occasionally but woke easily to the sound of wolves howling in the distance. At least, he thought they were wolves. His mind imagined they were the screams of Doug and Brenda Parks being torn apart by hungry Creepers. Either he needed more sleep, or Wes's imagination was beginning to rub off on him.

* * *

Paul woke them early. The sun had not yet crested the surrounding mountains but the sky showed midnight blue instead of inky black. They shivered as they packed the tents and gear into the car. No one argued with Paul that morning. The bags under his eyes and the look on his face told them it would be a mistake. Scott woke quickly and did not utter a single complaint all morning. It was obvious to all that the stolen pasta still we

ighed heavy on his mind. Deacon awoke headache free and was surprisingly well spirited throughout the morning, especially knowing what lay ahead.

They were happy to get into the car. It offered a good shelter even in its smashed condition, and Paul turned the heat on high for the first hour of their journey. The four crowded in the back cuddled together under a blanket and happily shared their warmth. For the first time there was an advantage to being squished in so close together. In the front Deacon and Jen also shared a blanket. Paul sat alone. They watched the mist swirl and twist on the cold asphalt as they made their way down the lonely mountain highway.

* * *

The opening of the tunnel was a giant concrete jaw. There was silence in the car as adrenaline

surged. A small moan came from Liv. It was no longer a destination and a worry, the tunnel was now directly in front of them.

"Okay. Well. We're here," said Paul in the most confident voice he could muster.

No one responded.

"I suppose we should grab the rifle, shotgun, and maybe even the axe out of the back. We should also throw our stuff in the trunk, anything that's not tied down. It will stay safe back there and give us more room to manoeuvre the weapons if we need to," said Paul.

"I said it before and I'm going to say it again. This is stupid, and it's a mistake," said Anna. "I've been getting some weird images in my head. Maybe premonitions, I don't know. They're telling me that going into that tunnel is folly."

It was the only thing she said all morning.

"There's no way we can go around it, it's a sheer rock wall on each side, and there's no way over it, and no way under," said Deacon, interrupting what would have been a far angrier response from Paul. "And we've all agreed there is no going back. There's only through, Anna…and I sure as hell ain't gonna walk."

They got out and stretched warily. They watched the tunnel with great unease as they unloaded their weapons and put away their belongings.

"Alright, everyone in," said Paul. His voice was like a knife.

"Does anyone have anything to say before we do this?" asked Paul.

"God help us," said Jen.

"Okay then, does anyone have anything to say that's a little more positive?" asked Paul again.

A short silence became a long pause.

"C'mon, guys! Jesus! I think I'm gonna shit my pants too, but someone's got to have something," said Paul.

"Don't fear the passage to the worlds beyond," said Deacon.

Paul turned and looked at Deacon with wonder. They all took it in. The words seemed to have all too much meaning at that moment.

The engine roared.

"Hey ho, let's go," said Paul and the loaded car lurched forward as he rammed his foot against the gas. The approach to the tunnel was like riding a rollercoaster car on its steady ascent to the top of the first drop. When they reached the entrance, it was freefall.

One side of the tunnel consisted of thick concrete posts with large open spaces to the outside. Driving quickly by them produced a steady beat of sunlight to darkness back to sunlight that made them feel like they were in some dance club with a strobe light, or like the film in an old black and white movie.

It was not long until the horror of the situation hit. Doug and Brenda Parks hadn't lied or embellished the peril in the tunnel. The first obstacle was cars. Abandoned, or more likely hijacked, they blocked the path. Glass, metal, and what Scott thought looked like bone reflected the sunlight beaming through the cracks. Ahead the darkness intensified as the pillars that opened to the day stopped and they were forced to rely on their single remaining headlight. Paul managed to keep his speed, smartly passing by, and in-between, the abandoned vehicles like he was in a NASCAR race. Ahead, two cars sat side by side nearly blocking the way, and Paul was forced to rub against an old mini-van to get by and an explosion of sparks lit up the inside of the tunnel. The light from the sparks revealed the scene ahead for an instant, and everyone in the car recoiled in terror.

Of the many creatures, animals, and even plants that found their way across the portals, none bothered Deacon like Scorps. They were by far the most insect-like of the horrors that had crossed over, but were thankfully also among the smallest. Small, at least compared to the other creatures, weighing only fifty to sixty pounds, the size of a medium dog. Deacon despised insects. He always had, and always would. He couldn't remember an incident from his childhood that made him that way. He'd never fallen asleep in a spider infested sleeping bag, or had a centipede crawl onto his privates

while sitting on the toilet of an old outhouse, or even poured out a glassful of maggots from an old container of soured milk, but these were the things he had nightmares about. That was, until the day he'd seen a Scorp. Deacon had done everything in his power not to show the fear he felt since Doug and Brenda told them about what lay ahead. When he saw the tunnel walls, road, and ceiling covered and crawling with them he nearly fainted in fear and disgust.

"Holy Christ!" yelped Paul as he took in the image.

"Jesus, Paul, faster!" gasped Deacon.

The first of the Scorps smashed against the front of the car. Inside the passengers bounced and jolted around. The creatures fell from the ceiling as they passed, some dropped too late and fell behind them, some too early and found their way under the tires, and some, unfortunately, dropped perfectly on top of the hood and roof. They had the horrible ability to stick to a flat surface like a spider and it proved difficult for Paul to shake them from the car. He struggled to see ahead in the darkness as the creatures were strewn across the windshield and blocking the headlight. Liv wailed as she realized the car was being enveloped by the bugs. The creatures could smell the flesh inside, and they frenzied after it. She and Wes in the back were the first to face one. Wes struggled with the bug after it entered through the smashed back window. He didn't have time to fire the shotgun as it jumped right on top of him. It may have been a good thing though, as in the midst of the chaos an awkward blast could have gone right through the seat into Paul, or even into his own leg. Deacon saw Wes's situation and smashed the beastly thing ferociously with the back end of his axe. The creature squealed and let out a fluid that looked like mustard and reeked of sulfur. The four of them in the back managed to somehow squish themselves into the far half of the back seat as Deacon pounded it. As they travelled down the road the sound of the engine mixed with the grasshopper-like creaking of the Scorps and the screams and curses from inside of the car.

Paul focused on maintaining speed and not crashing as around him his companions struggled against the onslaught. Scott fired the rifle repeatedly, and as carefully as he could, with relatively good

aim. The sound of the gun was a more effective way to scare away the things than the actual bullet, but the broken back window proved to be their Achilles heel. The rest of the glass was a surprisingly safe barrier and only one small crack formed on Deacon's passenger side window from a hit by the pincher of a feverish Scorp.

The smell in the car was pungent. The reek was so strong that Jen felt like she was going to pass out. She was pressed so hard against the passenger door she could barely breathe, but she was interrupted before being able to complain.

"What the hell is that?" asked Paul after turning through another steep curve in the road. Something extremely bright appeared ahead and began to blind them. Paul turned the wipers on to rid the windshield of the yellow film. As they approached the light the creatures fell away from the car. They no longer lined the walls, ceiling or road. Suddenly, all was quiet and smooth.

"I don't know," answered Deacon as he squinted at the light.

"Open your window, Deacon, please!" begged Jen, choking from the smell in the polluted backseat.

Wes tossed the wet carcasses of two mangled Scorps out the car. The yellow blood was hot and irritating on his hands.

"Oh, my God, it can't be," said Paul as they approached. But it was, and he realized he'd seen the same image before. On clips and stories from the news.

They had found their first portal.

When Paul's eyes finally adjusted to the light he got a good view of it. It looked to him like a vertical pool of mercury with an intense and reflective metallic glow. He could see the reflection of his headlight in its rectangular shape. Most of the portal appeared to be buried right into the granite wall of the mountain. It was clearly the source of the tunnel's infestation.

"Oh, my God. Should we go in?" asked Wes.

"Jesus Christ, no! Are you fucking serious?" asked Paul who approached the open lane beside

the portal at a good speed. The smell in the car was horrendous.

"I can't breathe. Open up the rest of the windows or I'm gonna faint," gasped Liv.

Paul, Deacon, and Jen undid their windows, but it proved to be a serious mistake. A lone Scorp that somehow held onto the shadowed passenger side of the car made its way in through the open window and right onto Deacon's lap. His scream was something from out of a nightmare; an almost feminine pitch echoed throughout the car and shocked all of them. Scott managed to fling the thing back through the window with the barrel of the rifle but the commotion caused Paul to swerve directly toward the portal. Paul did his best to compensate, but it was too late, and the massive car slid sideways across the threshold. The vehicle was sliced in two, as the back end passed into, and across, the portal's edge.

* * *

From out of the other end of the mirrored portal, into a world with a purple sky that the seven group members could only begin to imagine, emerged the trunk of a 1974 Lincoln Towncar. The car's brown metal rear end was sliced off with perfect precision. The two back end tires were still spinning as it tumbled and flipped through the thick misty air. Cans of pasta, dried meats, bags, tents, pots, pans, flashlights, clothing, half of an old hunting bow, and an old toilet seat chaotically plummeted and finally came to rest in a forgotten canyon, where it was never found again by any living thing of this world.

* * *

Jen thought they were dead. The intense light that she saw was heaven, and they were headed toward God. It was only when Deacon shook her out of it that she realized she was neither dead, or on

the other side of the portal.

"C'mon, baby, they're coming," said Deacon as he helped her out of the car.

The sounds of the rifle blasted down the tunnel as Paul fired repeatedly at the approaching Scorps. They seemed to detest the light, but their desire for nourishment overpowered their fear. The remains of the front of the car sat destroyed beyond the portal. Gas and fluid spilled out across the asphalt from the split fuel tank and lines. The light from the back of the portal was not nearly as intense as the front, and from the back it resembled a floating slab of stainless steel beside the destroyed car.

"C'mon, Deacon, no time!" said Paul as he let off another shot at the encroaching Scorps. Each shot made them stop for only a moment and reconsider their approach, but each time they continued on. They were not at all like Creepers or Fangs, they were simply mindless insects.

Wes stopped and looked at their ruined vehicle as Lucky sat whimpering in his arms. The passengers in the backseat came very close to finding themselves on the other side, or at least parts of them had. It was a miracle that a hand, shoulder, or head did not find itself on the wrong side of the portal. A perfect cut, that Scott would later say looked it'd been done by a light saber, went diagonally through the trunk, axle, and assorted car parts. Wes saw his notebook lying innocently on the ground. A small, perfect slice had been cut off the bottom right corner, but it remained otherwise intact with his blue pen still attached to the top. He grabbed it greedily. Paul noticed this and walked up to him and snatched it away without explanation. He tore out a few pages and handed it back to Wes, who wore an expression of bewilderment.

"Liv, tell me you still have that Zippo," said Paul.

"Yeah," she replied, still shocked, and reached into her back pocket.

"Alright, you guys, run!" said Paul. They obeyed without argument and took off in a full sprint toward the end of the tunnel. Paul lit the edge of the torn paper and placed the Zippo into his own pocket. He could hear both the footfalls of his companions sprinting off into in the darkness, and the

creaking sound of the approaching creatures.

"You were a good car; we just need one more thing," said Paul quietly.

Paul tossed the burning wad of paper onto the gas and oil spilled around the car. It quickly took as Paul raced away from it with all the strength that he had left. He expected the same magnificent explosion he had seen so many times before in the movies. The remnants of the car did not explode, but instead burned intensely enough to light their passage down the tunnel. It created an effective barrier, as together the car and the portal blocked any passage. They ran with all their might. The only things that burned with more intensity than the car were their lungs as they ran toward the distant light at the tunnel's far end.

Chapter 15 – Charred Remnants

Wesley David - Entry # 15

We're fucked.

* * *

They ran as long and as hard as they ever had before. None of them knew how long the burning car would block the creatures. They did not know how far they would follow or even if they would. But the group would not take any further chances. Around them the mountain breeze blew cool and calm while the sun beamed brightly from a cloudless blue sky. They had lost everything. They had no food, no shelter, and no transportation. The seven ran along the high mountain road for half an hour at a steady jog until they finally slowed down to a walk as Anna and Scott could no longer hold the pace. They saw no sign of pursuit, but Paul stayed in the back with the rifle raised and insisted they continue to walk. Many of them were in tears and sobbed as they stumbled along. Together they looked like prisoners walking toward their execution. Only Lucky was immune to the mood. The dog bounced happily down the road sniffing the rocks and small but vibrant mountain flowers that lined the shoulders of the highway. After another hour of walking in silence they stopped at a small waterfall for a drink and a short rest.

"What are we gonna do now?" asked Wes to anyone who would answer.

He got no response. Most of them were in a state of mind to give up, or too out of breath to offer a response. They were physically and mentally exhausted, and were already beginning to feel the hunger that they feared would never find satiation. Liv seemed to take it the worst.

"My pictures," she sobbed. "They're all gone…my dad, my mom…Kyle…gone."

They had lost the last of their personal belongings, and Liv's comment only served to remind them it was not only the food and tents. They packed everything into that large trunk to keep it from being damaged while traveling through the tunnel. It had proven to be a serious mistake.

"The important thing is that we're all here, right?" said Deacon after catching his breath. Again there was no response. Paul looked at him with doubt as he leaned against a moss covered boulder.

"It will be alright, you guys," said Deacon, who somehow still had a note of confidence in his voice. "We'll have to start from square one again, but we can do it."

"Deek, now is not the time for a motivational speech. Let's just be miserable for a while, okay?" said Paul.

It was an empty moment in an area of unsurpassed beauty. They were surrounded with majesty on all sides, almost suffocated by it. The snow capped mountains towered around them with layered rock formations that revealed their antiquity. They could smell the fresh pine from the trees that covered the lower slopes where they now sat. Behind them the small waterfall continued its quiet sprinkle down the side of the mountain and down through a culvert beneath the highway. But they sat alone together, oblivious, and lost in sorrow.

After twenty minutes of hopeless desperation Paul got up and viewed the highway. He then slowly looked at each of them with determination. "Well, I think Wes asked this about half an hour ago, and there was no response, so I'll ask it this time: What are we gonna do now?"

"Sucking on your rifle might not be too bad of an idea," muttered Scott. He head was drooped beneath his knees.

"Anyone here not up for suicide?" asked Paul.

"I told you not to go through," said Anna.

"Oh, shut up," said Jen. "It's easy to say that now. God knew it wasn't going to be easy. Saying I told you so is only making this harder."

Anna looked to the ground.

"Can someone explain something to me?" asked Scott. "Why the *fuck* didn't the Parks tell us about the portal in there? It's not like it's a small detail you could miss."

"I don't know," said Wes, "maybe it appeared after?"

"I seriously doubt that," commmented Paul.

"They wanted us to go through it," said Anna quietly. There was absolute certainty in her voice.

They all let the comment soak in as they marched hopelessly down the road.

* * *

"Well, what does the 'Lost in the Rockies Without a Hope' manual say?" asked Scott after an hour.

"Let me see," said Paul who pretended to pull an invisible book from his pocket. "It says…'quickly devour the biggest fat-ass nearby, before he eats you.'"

Only Deacon was in any mood to scoff.

"Very funny," Scott said to Paul. "Mind if I read that?"

Paul handed Scott the invisible book. Scott took it and for the next few minutes flipped its pages and read it with wrinkles of concentration on his forehead.

"I guess we solved the food problem," said Deacon. "But what we need to do is find shelter and warmth for tonight. I think that's the most pressing issue. And water I suppose, but I don't think that should be too much of a problem up here."

"There's no decision to make, you guys," said Wes as he looked up from doodling in his notebook. "We're obviously not going back through that tunnel and we couldn't get around it even if we wanted too. I don't think we're going to get rescued sitting here, and while the waterfall is nice, we're going to starve unless we start eating rock. So I guess we should see what's down yonder road."

They slowly got up. They all knew that there was no choice to make; they just needed a push. The walking turned out to be good for them. The fresh mountain air filled their lungs and brightened their spirits. They began to come around after a few hours in the sunshine.

* * *

Anna was glad to be on her feet again. She was still angry at the group, especially that nagging she-bitch Jen, and felt no guilt about it. Sitting in one place allowed her to concentrate on her anger. Scott's stupid song was helping her to relax a little. She told them not to go into the tunnel. She felt a strong sensation in the back of her mind when the tunnel was first mentioned, and she knew something very bad was going to happen. Her mind sensed things again, like when she was child. She didn't know if it was Sara, or the mist, but something was awakened. And she saw it. She saw the tunnel and knew that entering was folly. No one died, but her head had been only inches away from being split perfectly in two; in fact, she'd even lost a chunk of her hair, and they lost everything they had. Before today she thought she had nothing left to lose but her life. She was wrong.

* * *

This sucks ass, thought Wes as he trudged behind Deacon down the highway. He felt the familiar burn of hunger gnaw his belly and a weakness spread throughout his body because of it. They'd become used to living on very little food but there were at least a few meager snacks throughout the day to keep the weakness from setting in. When they were going to have their next meal was anyone's guess. *God, I can only imagine how Scott feels, that song must not be making it easier for him.*

* * *

Scott sang (wailed) to the beat of his boots hitting the asphalt. "Two…all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, on a, sesame seed bun." Over and over again, with growing enthusiasm. Scott was already back in his usual form. As they walked he convinced Deacon and the others to join in. Scott felt they made a pretty good team.

* * *

"Two"

Deacon's main concern was that they find somewhere to stay that was warm and sheltered for the night.

"all beef patties,"

They wouldn't sleep at all if they didn't and it would make the lack of food even more trying.

"special sauce, lettuce, cheese,"

Food was also going to be a problem and it was time to go hunting.

"pickles, onions,"

The problem was how few bullets they had left.

"on a sesame"

If they were going to shoot something it'd better count.

"seed"

They were only a few bullets away from his axe being the deadliest weapon they had, and that was the scariest thought of all.

"bun."

* * *

Liv struggled to stop the tears as they walked again. She imagined she must have felt the same as the families that stood and stared, helpless, at the charred remnants of their home after a fire. It was never the things you could replace that mattered, it was the things that you couldn't. She already struggled to remember what her father's face looked like, it was probably her mind playing with her, but it wouldn't come back to her. She occasionally sobbed as they continued on but she managed to get a hold of herself as she listened to Scott and Deacon sing that absurd song. Over time she quietly joined in.

* * *

Paul walked in front of them with the rifle loaded like he was a World War One doughboy heading into the trenches. They were in serious trouble. Probably more serious than even he realized. They were headed into the unknown, and the only thing they would be sure to find was danger, cold, and hunger. He suspected something like this would happen eventually on the journey, but not so soon, and not so drastic. They somehow managed to lose all of their gear and food in one swoop, without losing a single group member. The thought of trading Anna for the tents and a sweater entered his mind. As he listened to them sing-a-long behind him he realized that either the rest of the group was in far better spirits, starting to go mad with hunger, or just didn't realize what they were up against. Damn, he was hungry. Paul smiled. *How can they sing that ridiculous song right now?*

* * *

Jen did not take long to join in on the song. She suspected, correctly, that it was bothering Paul, breaking him out of his seriousness. *What the hell, anyway?* she thought as she sang and marched

along with Scott's rhythmic footfalls. *Paul is hating this!* A feeling of euphoria came over her.

* * *

They continued to trudge along the highway, singing and humming in turn. The one positive thing was that they were making a steady descent into a large valley that contained a meandering deep blue lake down its center, so at least they would have water. They stopped and looked across the impressive landscape below.

"Can you spot any buildings out there, Liv?" asked Paul

Liv's pretty eyes squinted as they scanned the valley. "Yes, I see something. It looks like there's some kind of building way down by where the railroad tracks cross the river, see?" she pointed toward it.

Most of them saw it, although it took a few of them some time. When they finally saw it they were again impressed with her seemingly ever improving eyesight. The building appeared to be a mill or garage.

"How far away do you think it is?" asked Wes.

"It's impossible to tell, I'm not good with distances, especially with all these mountains around. I suspect it's much farther than we think. I doubt if we can get there tonight, anyway," said Liv.

"We're gonna have to sleep somewhere," said Deacon.

"I agree we need shelter tonight. I don't even have a jacket, and we could freeze up here tonight. We've got to at least make it down into the valley," said Paul.

None of them were up for the march, especially with the emptiness in their stomachs. Already their muscles and feet ached from walking for so long. Their short time traveling in the car had spoiled them.

"Unless we come across something on the way, that garage is our destination. I don't care if we have to walk straight through the night," continued Paul. "We can make a base there, and go hunting, maybe fishing too. We'll be okay for a while without food, so long as we have a roof over our heads and some walls to hold it up."

No one argued. They were happy to have a destination and some sort of plan, instead of wondering hopelessly down the empty highway. They walked along the asphalt for hours, losing sight of the distant building in the growing darkness. For some time heat radiated from the highway, and helped to keep them warm, but as they walked and the hours passed, the mist grew and it became unbearably cold. Most of them were just wearing T-shirts now—only the lucky ones had kept a sweater or a long sleeved shirt on. They shivered as they walked, and occasionally Paul would break them into a light jog to keep them both awake and warm. They hadn't eaten since early that morning, and their stomachs screamed for food. Lucky, who for a while had been the only one of them with energy, became fussy as they walked. She stopped and whined behind them.

"Pick that thing up, Wes. If she can't keep up, she's dinner," said Paul, angry at again having to stop and wait for it. There was complete seriousness in his tone. Wes grabbed the dog and carried her in his arms. He didn't mind the extra weight, as the lanky pup warmed his hands and stomach.

After only one short stop for a drink at a small stream, they finally came down into the base of the valley after midnight. They tucked their hands under their shirts, or over their frozen ears. Snot dripped from their noses and they slapped their numb thighs. It warmed slightly as they descended, but it still hovered only a few degrees above freezing. As they marched down into the valley the mists thickened around them.

"This isn't just fog, is it?" asked Deacon as they walked.

"Naw, man. It's more," said Paul.

They all knew it. The mist itself didn't have a smell, but you could tell when you were breathing it in, or walking through it.

"*Great*," muttered Scott in despair.

"I hope it doesn't get worse," said Deacon. "The last thing we need now is a repeat of a couple days ago."

"It's nowhere near as thick. Still, we should be careful," said Paul who stopped and addressed the group. Lucky didn't even look up from her sleep in Wes's tired arms. "We're coming into some mist here. It's more than fog, I'm sure of it. Everyone stay close, and keep talking."

Everyone agreed but no conversation began. They were too tired and too hungry. They did manage to stay in a close formation, and it helped with the cold but as they walked further and further into the darkness before them the mist took hold.

* * *

Deacon felt fortunate the mist had little effect on him. Jen had long since closed her eyes and followed behind him with her finger around the back belt loop of his jeans. Scott let out the occasional yelp as they walked. Paul continuously rubbed his eyes, while Anna, Wes, and Liv did their best to follow the line of the highway, sometimes asking Deacon if he saw the same things they did. *What a nightmare,* thought Deacon as he peered out into the darkness. He noticed a strange swirl here, and a strange shape there, but nothing that caused him the same discomfort the rest of the group experienced. Fortunate, indeed. Deacon jumped as suddenly a shape came out of the darkness in front of them.

"Whoa, you guys see that?" he asked, stopping in his tracks.

Paul looked up dumfounded from the highway. He raised his rifle and instantly fired at the form in front of them out of reflex. The echo from the shot travelled throughout the valley and came back to them from more than one distant mountainside. They announced their arrival in the valley in an earsplitting fashion. After the echo died Deacon thought he could hear stirring off in the distance.

"Oh, my God, what did you just shoot?" asked Jen.

"Stay back. I don't know yet. I don't even know if it was real," said Paul.

Deacon readied his axe as Paul loaded another bullet into the rifle. At the sound of the blast Lucky came alive, and barked and growled at whatever it was that Paul shot. As they approached in the darkness they could hear it struggling for breath, they could hear blood bubble in its lungs. The body kicked and spasmed in an attempt to get back upright.

Paul looked down at Wesley David, sprawled and bleeding on the cold highway. The bullet had hit him squarely in the chest and blood leaked out from between his fingers as he struggled to keep it inside. Paul froze, unable to believe what he'd done.

In the distance he could hear laughing.

"Nice shot, man! This is awesome!" said Deacon enthusiastically as he approached from behind.

Stunned and appalled at the comment, Paul turned to Deacon and readied his hand to strike.

"Dibs on his ribs!" said Scott, also excited.

Anger erupted in Paul's heart and it combined with the fear and panic that coursed through his veins. He could feel the hairs standing on end all over his body. How could they? Paul dropped the rifle and dove to Wes's aid. He attempted to put pressure on the wound but there was no doubt the shot was fatal. Blood poured over his hands and jeans as he watched Wes struggle to breathe and then stop. A trickle of blood came out of the corner of his mouth. He looked back at the faces of his companions.

What had he done?

"Jeepers, Paul, what are you gonna do? Give him CPR?" asked Liv, but sarcastically with a big smile on her face.

"How could you!" screamed Paul back at her. Paul glared at them all, astounded and furious, but when he looked back at Wes he suddenly found the still warm body of a dead mountain goat cradled in his arms. Paul lifted his tear stained face and looked back at them. Stunned. The six of them

stood around him in a semi-circle, including Wes with the dog, now awake, and in his arms. They all returned his stunned expression.

"Dude… relax. It's just a goat," said Scott, who was the first to quietly speak.

Paul turned back and looked at the animal in his arms. Blood still dripped from the wound in the animal's chest, and it was now all over his hands and soaked into his sweatshirt.

"Hey, Paul…you okay?" asked Deacon.

Paul came to his senses and dropped the goat back to the ground. He attempted to wipe the tears in his eyes with his sleeve but only succeeded in smearing blood across his face. When he stood up and turned to the group they stepped back in surprise. Paul looked like a bloody corpse.

"I'll let you get this one, Deek," said Paul who walked a short distance away and plopped himself down on the road. "Wes, come over here for a minute…talk to me about something….Tell me about…tell me about your parents."

Wes shrugged his shoulders at the group and gave them a bemused look. He walked over and sat down beside Paul and told him about his Mom and Dad. Deacon borrowed one of Scott's knives and began to clean the goat, a job usually performed by Paul.

In the distance, something howled.

Chapter 16 – Kill the Pig

Wesley David – Entry # 17

I'm so hungry I could eat my own hand. It actually looks quite delicious, like four little chicken wings and one little drumstick. A little salt, some hot sauce and mmmmm...

As I write this I'm getting ready to go to bed on an oily tarp in an old train engine service shed. I don't know where I'm getting the energy to push this pen across the page. I think I need to, though. It's my therapy.

I find myself wondering where our stuff is. At the bottom of a great ocean? Or maybe melted by the lava of a volcanic pit? Perhaps little green Oompa Loompas are eating our ravioli and trying on our fashions. Maybe it's all floating out in space somewhere, slowing spinning off into the endless cosmos. All we've got now is a rifle, an axe, a couple of knives, and a Zippo. No water bottles, no tents, no rations. It's hopeless, I know. What the hell are we going to do? I wish we never left Hinton. A comfortable little cottage doesn't seem too bad right now to me. It would be a hell of a lot better than munching mountain goat in an old storage shed.

I think we'll lie low here for a while. If everyone else is half as tired as I am, than they could sleep for a week. Paul is miserable, he's being an absolute bastard right now, and I say this as his best friend in the group. Oh, well – we're all delirious with hunger and exhaustion.

OOMPA-LOOMPA-DOOPITY-DOO!!!

* * *

Paul did his best to rub the blood from his face and eyes but it proved difficult without water. It stained his face, and crusted in his eyebrows and hairline, making him look like he was a pedestrian on the wrong side of a school bus. Lucky was also covered with blood from licking the warm salty pools

of it from the asphalt. The group sat on the highway together while Deacon did his best to gut the poor beast. Paul felt like an animal himself as he watched Deacon cutting and cleaning on the road.

* * *

Cheeseburgers never looked like this, thought Deacon as he struggled with his knife to cut through the stringy tendons and ligaments of the animal. Paul usually did the cleaning when they made a kill and Deacon had a new appreciation for the job. Deacon sometimes helped when it was a large kill, and Paul had taught him the basics of organ removal. The teaching proved useful, but did not make the task easy. Scott sat beside him trying to offer advice and support but he was more like a backseat driver. His comments cut Deacon's patience in the same way his knife cut the goat's throat.

* * *

A lucky kill, thought Liv. At this point she would be happy to eat her share. Being a vegetarian had been easy in the past, but even in the old days, when vegetables and pasta had been plentiful, she used to sneak a strip of bacon or the occasional hot dog. But she never had been turned on by big bloody slabs of meat until tonight. She felt the hunger worse than any of them. Her body screamed for nourishment. She'd become skeletal. Her cheeks felt sunken, her tits were disappearing, and her arms were like broomsticks with hands. She felt like her already empty tank was running out of fumes.

* * *

"Split the ribs apart…no, no…dude, you can't pull that shit out until you split the ribs," said Scott, frustrated.

"Yeah, no kidding, Scott," answered Deacon equally frustrated. "You know, you're welcome

to take over at any time."

Scott gave no reply. It was the fourth time Deacon offered him the job, and Scott had not yet jumped at the opportunity. After an arduous time removing the organs, Deacon moved onto the head and hooves under Scott's continued guidance. The blood pooled below him but he continued determined and hungry. Not far away on a nearby grassy slope, Anna, Wes, and Jen fell asleep closely cuddled with one another for warmth. Deacon shivered as the goat's blood cooled on his hands and soaked through the knees of his jeans. He removed the small antler from the animal, broke off the two long pieces, and sharpened them. When he was finished they looked like crude pagan ceremonial daggers. As he did this Scott played with the dead goat's mouth, moving it up and down while mouthing assorted phrases for Deacon's enjoyment.

"*Kill the Pig! Cut its Throat! Kill the Pig!"* mouthed Scott doing his best *Lord of the Flies* allusion. Deacon frowned.

"You shouldn't disrespect that animal, Piggy. It's going to keep us from eating you," said Deacon. "Here, these will be better than fists if we need to defend ourselves." He handed the sharpened horns to Scott.

"Jesus, we've gone back to the stone age. We may as well go find a cave," answered Scott, regarding the horns with doubt.

"That might not be too bad an idea," said Deacon.

Scott agreed to be the first to carry the carcass, and with a little help, he hoisted the dead animal onto his back. Deacon did his best to clean the blood from his hands on the grass, and then went over to wake up the rest of the group. It turned out to be a daunting task.

"Can't we nap for an hour or two?" whispered Jen trying to sound like she was still asleep. Her voice begged Deacon to agree. She kept her eyes closed and her hands tucked into her armpits as she quietly spoke.

"No…no…sorry, it's getting cold and all this blood is going to attract the beasties. We should

be careful because there are bears and wolves about too. And only God knows what else. Get up."

"Just an hour."

"Get up."

"No."

"*Jesus Christ! Get up now, dammit!*" Deacon roared at the three of them who tried to feign sleep. Deacon heard Jen mutter an insult under her breath as she, Anna, and Wes got up and staggered back onto the highway. Deacon didn't want to be that way, but Paul was out of it. He was in no position to lead them or to play his role of group asshole. They needed to move, the noise and the blood would draw danger—it was only a matter of time.

Scott got Paul up and going with no difficulty. Paul stood up quietly and followed him. Scott could see Paul was not his normal self, so he tried his best to bring him back.

"Do you like the new coat?" asked Scott modeling the carcass across his shoulders and back. He waved a hewn foot at Paul in a provocative manner. Paul gave a cold and empty look for a response.

"Okay, how about this… fat guy in a little goat… fat guy in a little goat," sang Scott while swaying his shoulders, doing his best Chris Farley impression. Only Scott laughed at his own joke.

"I need a new crowd," muttered Scott to himself as the group gathered together again on the highway.

"I'm sorry to get you up. I'm exhausted too, but we can't stay here. I know you guys don't need *me* to tell you that," said Deacon. His teeth chattered uncontrollably as he spoke. "I've got no energy to fight, and very little to flee if we need to, and I'm sure that you're no different. We've got to be only a few kilometers away from that shed now, and the daylight isn't far off. Let's just get there… then we will all take some time to rest and recuperate our strength.

"I can't, Deek," said Liv, weeping. "I'm empty."

"You can, and you will. Liv, I've seen it it, you're stronger than you know. That goes for all of

you. We're being tested here and we're gonna get through it. After Jessica you guys kept me going, I'll be damned if I can't return the favor. We've got food now, it's only a matter of time until we can cook it up, and shelter, warmth, and rest are not far. Don't let the mist mess you up. Just follow behind me, stare at the road and walk. One foot in front of the other and I'll take care of the rest. Scott, you take the back and make sure no one falls behind. Paul, are you okay to use the rifle?"

Paul gave a distant expression and looked off into the darkness.

"Whoa. Okay, why don't you give it to me," said Deacon.

Paul handed him the rifle and the expression on his face changed to embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Deek, I'm sorry."

"Follow me, Paul, you've led us through this kind of shit before…take a break this time."

From somewhere deep Deacon found strength. It was buried inside of him, even though he was famished and frozen, with cold goat's blood covering his worn out jeans and his thin T-shirt. The wet blood congealed as it froze. He hadn't slept or eaten for twenty four hours, and his numb ears and fingers burned with pins and needles. But from somewhere hidden a voice told him that if they stayed there, at least on this particular night, it would be the end of their journey.

Only moments after they all slowly began to trudge away Anna suddenly spoke. "We need to run."

"Are you kidding?" said Scott. "Why?"

"We need to run *now*!" yelled Anna loudly as if something possessed her. It startled most of them from their wearied stupor. There was a sense of urgency and desperation in her voice that even Paul heard.

No one argued as they broke into a trot that quickly became a sprint as the sounds of growls and howling erupted behind them.

They had come very close.

* * *

They arrived at the shed drunk with weariness. The sounds followed them for a while, but over time they slowly died away. There was still howling, and the occasional laughing sound, but it was far off. Deacon could not decide if it was wolves, creatures, or men, but it didn't matter. Whatever it was, they all sensed it was both evil and hungry.

"Paul. Paul! Are you up for this?" asked Deacon. The question seemed to snap him back into consciousness.

"Uh, yeah, no problem, gimme the axe," he responded. Anna handed it to him and proceeded to lie down right there in the dirt.

They had always been careful when they first entered a building, but today their lack of stamina would not allow it. On this particular morning Deacon walked up to the entrance of the shed with Paul and Scott behind him, and thrust it open with all of his might, rifle loaded, and ready for anything. He was too exhausted for subtlety.

"Oh, Jesus!" said Scott. "What's that smell?"

"Oh, fuck me," said Deacon, staring at a man's decaying body. It hung in front of them by a thin rope around its neck tied to the metal rafters of the ceiling. The eyes where white and the pupils were turned into the back of his head. A black tongue hung from his mouth. Deacon could see something was written across his shirt in blood. It read:

Vengeance

of

God

"This nightmare just won't stop!" said Paul who actually laughed in the background.

The light penetrating into the shed through the open door exposed tinges of green slowly spreading across his features.

"Who do you think did this?" gagged Scott.

"None of the creatures that I've met know how to spell. At least so far," gasped Deacon as he struggled to breathe in as little of the putrid air as possible. He noticed the man's face was beginning to harden. As he fought to saw the rope with Scott's knife, fluid leaked from the body's eyes and mouth. He stopped to gag. Thankfully, his stomach was empty of anything that may have been brought up. Scott also struggled to keep his bile down. Paul watched unaffected. Wes stared at the body with fear and revulsion from a safe distance.

"Did you guys see that?" asked Wes who jumped back terrified.

"See what…*ugh*," said Deacon between heaves.

"It was nothing, Wes, only the mist," answered Scott, who seemed to have seen the same thing.

The body made a sickening thud as Deacon cut the rope. The smell worsened as gas was expelled from the body. Deacon, Wes, and Scott were able to drag the body out by the end of the rope and did not have to touch the rotting corpse. Pulling the stinking thing to the river was a struggle in their weakened condition. They dragged the man downstream, out of sight from where the rest of the group were cleaning themselves up, and released the body into the water. Just as its cold white skin hit the frigid water the body suddenly went into convulsions, thrashing rotting arms and legs everywhere as it struggled against drowning. Its eyes opened up wide and a yell erupted from its decayed mouth.

"Jesus!" said Wes jumping back from the corpse.

"*Ugggggghhh*!" screamed Scott as the corpse thrashed around in front of him.

"What? What?" said Deacon, staring at the cold lifeless body that floated like a drifting log down the river. He saw nothing.

When they looked back from up the bank Wes and Scott both realized it was only the mist playing with their minds once again.

"Let's get back to the shed," said Wes, relieved but exhausted. "We need rest, the mist has more effect when you don't have the strength to fight it."

The three of them made their way back to the shed where the four and a half of their remaining companions were already laid out on a far corner of the shed's concrete floor. They found some tarps in one the many drawers and cabinets lining the sides of the shop and used them as makeshift bedding. By the time Deacon brought in the goat carcass and placed it in a dark cool corner, Scott and Wes were already asleep on the tarps with the rest. Deacon locked the main door with its large sliding deadbolt and placed the rifle, still loaded, on a nearby cabinet. He lay down beside Jen and tried to join the group in its slumber. A sleep finally came over him so deep and dark that the body that hung from the rafter would have been jealous.

Chapter 17 – The Hunted

Wesley David - Entry # 17

When I woke up this morning – or should I say, this afternoon –I had the worst hunger I've ever had in all of my life. I would have eaten a pig's asshole if one would have been placed before me. We have been through some light days, and some light weeks, but we have never gone without anything at all for this long. A couple of years ago, the tough and stringy goat meat would have made me gag, but this morning I gorged on it with glee. Finger lickin' good. The seven of us could likely have eaten the whole thing but Deacon, of all people, insisted we save some of it for drying.

The shed has a few things that have proved useful. What I'm most excited about right now is an old metal garbage can in which we are currently cooking goat soup. It took us a while get the dirt, grease and only God knows what else, out of that garbage can, and we boiled water in it so I'm confident that it's reasonably clean. Really, I couldn't care less; a little engine grease and chewed gum wads aren't going to be what kills me these days. To think I used to throw away milk that was a day past expiry. I would kill for a frosty glass of moo right now. Kill.

Speaking of kill,my feet are killing me. We took turns this morning comparing blisters. Liv was in the lead, until Deacon pulled out one of his nasty feet. It's pretty awful and looks like it's infected. It looks like he hurt it a few days back, maybe with the Giant Black, maybe before, but how he managed to walk all that way last night I can't imagine. How he managed to push us to walk that far, on those feet, amazes me. He's made out of sturdier stuff than I.

* * *

The group showed ingenuity with the mixed assortment of items found in the shed. They found paper cups, cleaner, some magazines, and an old tin of coffee whitener. Paul removed a large

drainage grate off the floor and laid it overtop of the oil drum as a grill. It worked well, and even with their hunger he was sure to clean and burn off the dirt and grit. Scott found a small assortment of tools throughout the drawers and cabinets in the shop, and Deacon cooked the large slabs of meat skewered on screwdrivers and handed them to his hungry companions when they were ready.

The goat's carcass was already attracting flies so they spent the morning cooking and drying the rest of the meat from the animal. They ate a large portion of it for a late breakfast, each of them taking helping after helping without conversation. They were sure to save all the bones and edible remains and throw them into the steaming soup pot for later. They tossed Lucky the tough meat and the occasional bone as they ate. She was delighted with the food and ate with the same enthusiasm as the rest of the group. After the large breakfast they all sat around the barrel in the old office chairs they'd found, and rested.

"I can't believe how happy I am right now," said Liv. "A full stomach, a reasonable chair, and a warm fire. Oh, how the mighty have fallen," she said wryly.

"Oh, I don't know," said Deacon as he dodged the smoke that billowed from the fire. "Those things always made me happy."

"I suppose, but it used to be a nice classy dinner, a biddable boy, and a fireplace in a big apartment with hardwood floors and a view," replied Liv.

"Take a good look around, the view can't get much nicer than this," said Paul.

The traces of the haze from the previous night's march had dissipated from the valley and they had a good view of the mountains around them, towering above the treetops. Around the clearing were wildflowers and tall moss covered pine trees that blocked the afternoon sun. Birds chirped and leaves rustled with the breeze. Paul was right, it was a beautiful fall day.

"This *is* magnificent country," said Anna. She'd spoken very little in the last few days, and they welcomed her comments.

"Deacon, do you remember when we used to come out here to get pissed out of our tree?"

asked Scott.

"Yeah, man. I remember *parts* of those trips, anyway. Do you remember coming out here in my dad's van, loaded down with beer and hotdogs? Not just hotdogs though, those smokies that were stuffed with onions and cheese and jalapenos. Smothered in mustard. Man. I would kill to have a cooler full of that stuff now," said Deacon.

"I would give my left nut for a frosty beer right now," said Scott.

"I would give my left tit for a cigarette," responded Liv. They laughed.

"Well, maybe it's just me, and maybe it's because I haven't had any food for almost two days, but this goat is pretty damn good," said Wes as he tore off another piece of hot meat skewered from a screwdriver. "The coffee could use some work, though." They all laughed. Warm water and coffee whitener made a bad mix, but offered more taste and substance than water alone.

"Kudos to the cook!" said Scott, who lifted what remained of his third slab of meat on a large screwdriver.

They all raised their cups in the air for Deacon. He couldn't help but smile. It was their way of not only thanking him for cooking, but for getting them there in the first place. They were down, but not out, and with some food in their bellies and the sun shining they felt like things might turn around.

"Can you imagine if someone told us where we would be now two years ago?" asked Wes. "If someone told me I would be eating a mountain goat, that Paul shot, in Jasper National Park, I would have laughed in their face."

"I doubt I would have believed it, either," answered Paul. "But I think the stories about the end of the world, strange monsters, and portals would probably have sounded a lot more unbelievable than the goat."

"True," agreed Wes with a mouthful.

"I wonder where we will be two years from now?" asked Liv.

There was a quiet silence after the question. It was always something to wonder where time

would take you, even before the world went upside down, but the most likely answer to Liv's question was they would be dead. Liv wished she hadn't asked. Chances were that their number would be called, at least some of them. Especially now with so little food, gear and supplies.

"Who knows, Liv?" said Deacon trying to break the uneasy silence. "Maybe things will get better, maybe we can go back home, rebuild and repair all of this, and have as many cigarettes, cold beers, and smokies as our hearts desire."

They locked eyes and smiled. She liked to hear things like that. They all did.

For dinner that evening they ate goat soup. The girls had scavenged berries and mushrooms for the soup earlier in the day, and Wes had discovered old packets of salt and some crackers that they all dumped into the oil drum. Their hunger had been temporarily defeated by the meat but their bodies were looking for more, and they each ate their share down to the last drop. It was hardier than the meat alone had been, and it helped to return some of the strength lost during the march.

"I would gladly trade a can of ravioli for another bowl. There's nothing like the taste of goat soup cooked over an oil drum in a garbage can. Just like mom used to make it. Is there any more?" asked Scott as he leaned back in an old office chair after downing his third helping.

"It's all gone, pal. We must've been hungry, there was enough there to feed twice as many of us, we're gonna have to be careful," replied Deacon, surprised they'd eaten so much.

"Deacon's right. We've got to start conserving now," said Paul in a serious tone. "I know we all needed to rebuild our strength but we can't expect to eat like this at each meal. We've got enough meat and mushrooms left for at least a few days here, especially if we stick with soup, but we've got to assume food is going to be a struggle for a while."

* * *

They did little more that night after dinner except gather firewood.

"How long are we gonna stay here, anyway?" asked Scott as he and Deacon brought back another load from the forest.

"I don't know, but it's good to be prepared." answered Paul.

"I think we should be moving on quick," said Deacon. "Thinking about that body, and who, or what, put it up there still has me a little uneasy, and this shed is cold and miserable. I'm sure we can find an old cabin or something better to regroup in."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. We shouldn't stay here too long, we'll be found by someone, or something, sooner or later. And that dead body wasn't a good sign," agreed Paul.

"And don't forget what was written on him," muttered Wes.

"Why don't we talk about something else?" suggested Liv to break the silence that followed Wes's comment. "I'm finally warm, clean, and stuffed. I haven't felt this good for a while."

"What we need are some drinks," said Scott. "Strong drinks. Tequila strong. Photocopier fluid strong."

"That bottle of rum we traded would be nice," said Wes. "All we've got to show for it now is this miserable mutt." Wes glanced down at the young dog. The dog's eyes looked back up at him without moving its head. Lucky was on edge the entire night, occasionally giving a low quiet growl for no reason. He could swear the dog had already grown over the short time they had her.

"Well, she's earned a dinner or two. And still may become a dinner or two. I like to think of her as emergency rations with a tail," said Paul, trying to sound serious.

"You're a cold hearted bastard," said Jen.

"Admit it. Last night on the highway, after a full day without so much as a sniff of food, and walking all that way without knowing where dinner was coming from…don't tell me Lucky didn't start to look tasty! Christ, I was so hungry I was looking at Scott and my mouth started to water." Paul smiled.

"I give to the needy, not the greedy," replied Scott laughing. "But you can still eat me."

"I wouldn't eat a dog if I was starving to death, on a glacier, for anything," said Jen, laughing. "I *would* rather eat Scott."

"Then you can both eat me," winked Scott.

They sat around the campfire, relaxed, and as content as they'd been in some time. Together they looked at the night sky, and pointed out familiar constellations and planets. They each had their favourite, and the imaginary shapes and figures were a comfort to them in the darkness. The stars and the marvel of the heavens were a new discovery for them since The Arrival. Staring into the endless spectacle above them was humbling, and made them feel connected to the countless people through time who had seen the very same stars with curiosity and wonder.

"Look!" exclaimed Paul, "There's another one!"

They all looked up to see a bright satellite slowly moving across the night sky.

"Why are you so fascinated by those things, Paul?" asked Scott quietly.

"Oh, I don't know. It's just…I guess you could say…they give me hope," answered Paul.

"Hope?" asked Deacon. "How?"

"I know that I'm home when they're up there," answered Paul softly. He looked down into the fire and the flames danced in his eyes. "They watch over us. Remind us of the incredible things mankind is capable of doing. The positive things. I guess they reassure me everything that happened before this was real. That my mother was real. That my life and my dreams were real. And they give me hope that maybe they could be real again."

"Heavy," said Scott as they sat in silence watching the satellite disappear behind the mountains surrounding them.

As they sat and continued to stare into the heavens the sky lit up with an impressive display of northern lights. They danced like ribbons of candy emanating an eerie green glow. They could almost hear a hum as they shimmered across the sky.

"My God, they're beautiful," said Anna, stunned at the display.

"I noticed them starting up a little earlier, but this…this is something else," said Paul looking up with the rest of them.

The colours grew as they watched, eventually taking up almost the entire night sky with green and purple undulating swirls. They all watched as the aurora grew brighter and brighter. Eventually they could see across the entire campsite from the light.

"I've never seen 'em come even close to this bright before," said Paul bewildered. His neck began to hurt from looking up for so long.

"This isn't natural. There's no way," said Wes, astounded by the sight.

"My God, it's almost like daylight out here. This is weird," said Jen.

"It's almost like the swirls are forming letters," observed Liv.

"You're imagining it," replied Paul.

"No, maybe she's right," agreed Wes. "Can you see that ribbon with the red at the bottom? I think I can see numbers or letters too."

"You're imagining it," said Scott in agreement with Paul. "Like seeing things in the clouds."

"No, Scott. See that one? It looks a capital 'I'," argued Jen.

Deacon brought his head down and looked around the campsite. His neck and shoulders were still sore form the night before, and gathering firewood for the last two hours hadn't helped. He hadn't seen anything in the lights, in fact, he saw some light, but it was nothing near the spectacle his companions described. They were either exaggerating to each other, or imagining the things entirely, but he didn't want to ruin their enjoyment by commenting. Suddenly, he realized that mist, like long green tentacles, crept out of the trees around the campsite.

"Hey. *Hey*! Take a look around," said Deacon, interrupting what was becoming an argument.

Everyone turned from the display in the sky to see for themselves that they were being enveloped by a strange green haze. It was only then that they noticed they were surrounded.

"Into the shed!" yelled Deacon who bolted from his seat toward the door, just in time to miss a large black form that collapsed his chair under its attack. Deacon was lucky, but Wes and Scott were both too slow.

Another shape appeared in front of Deacon as he ran to aid Scott and Wes. It was a man. A fist connected with Deacon's chest, knocking him back so hard that he tripped and fell onto the attacker that crushed his chair. The girls hadn't gone for the safety of the shed, but instead joined into the growing fray. They did their best to punch and claw at the men that held Scott, but were having little success. Deacon struggled to get up, but hard boots kicked his chest and head. His eyebrow exploded under one blow and an array of stars suddenly dazed his sight.

Only Paul put up any real resistance. The assailants did not see the rifle he laid down beside his chair in the darkness, and luckily, he was not the focus of the attack as Deacon's size and height attracted the most attention. Paul managed to get free from his attacker and grab the rifle. He quickly smashed an ugly young kid's face with the butt. His nose burst under Paul's assault. As Paul readied to shoot, he quickly realized that these men did not intend to kill them, at least not yet. Deacon's hands were tied behind his back and his face looked bloodied and pulpy. Wes and the girls were overcome and tied up. If their assailants wanted to kill them, their throats would have already been slit.

Paul put his boot over the throat of the kid that had jumped him and placed the end of the rifle against his head. "Stop! Stop now or I shoot!"

Paul could see two of the men who had sat back and watched the fight pull long shiny daggers from their robes. The commotion stopped and a quiet standoff begun. Wes struggled away from a large man he'd been wrestling with and ran to Paul's side. The rest of the group members were either held, or tied up. There were at least fifteen forms standing in bright red robes beneath the eerie green light above them.

A short skinny man with dark rimmed spectacles emerged from the trees. He hadn't taken part in any of the fighting. His glasses were taped together in the middle and looked like something an overgrown Harry Potter would wear. A thick red robe that was far too big for his frame sat on his shoulders. He approached confidently and walked right up to Paul and looked him in the eyes and spoke:

"Have you accepted Isack as the son of God and the new leader of mankind on earth?" His voice was low and serious and when he spoke the name "Isack" his followers repeated the name instantly in unison.

Paul didn't answer the man's question, he instead asked one of his own. "Why did you attack us? What did we do?"

The man looked at him at him seriously and quoted, "It is not always what a man has done, but what he has not. I will ask you only once more: Have you accepted Isack as the son of God, and the new leader of mankind on earth?"

The picture of the body hanging from the rafters of the shed flashed into Paul's mind. These men were as dangerous as any Creeper or Fang, and the group was outnumbered two to one. There was no room left for pride.

"We're on our way to Utah," answered Paul.

"Ahhhh, so you seek the truth and the light!" said the man who seemed suddenly relieved. "It is good to see more young people such as yourselves making the journey to the holy city." The man smiled and motioned his hand to the men, who released the rest of the group members. Deacon limped in behind Paul, with one of his eyes already beginning to swell shut.

"Seven companions. How interesting…but four men and three women. Close indeed. Tell me, how much do you know of Isack and His prophecies?" asked the man.

"At this point not enough, but the first thing I would like to know is why his followers would suddenly attack us from the shadows without provocation?" asked Paul.

"Yes, a nasty necessity it is, but once you arrive and learn of Isack's teachings you will understand," said the man smiling. "I am Asimond, and together with my initiates we search for those who deny His divinity, and punish all those who will not accept His teachings. We also hunt, and bring to heel, the wicked men and beasts Satan has unleashed upon our earth. Just because you are from this world, does not mean that evil does not hold sway over your heart. You can only be on one

side of the light."

The group of young men behind the man spoke in almost perfect unison, "You are either part of His light, or you seek His light. All others are the enemy. All others will answer to the vengeance of God."

The image of the same words, scrawled across the hanging man's chest, came back to them. They'd heard rumors that Isack's followers were devout, and his name and "miracles" were spreading across the world, even without the aid of smartphones or the internet, but they never considered that they were yet another danger to avoid.

"Would you now kindly release that initiate?" asked Asimond calmly.

Paul stepped back and removed the rifle from the boy's head. The young man got up and scowled at Paul. His face was covered in blood and dirt, but his angry eyes defiantly stood out in the pale green light.

"When, and if, you reach the great walled city be sure to abandon your weapons before approaching the gates. No follower of Isack requires a firearm. We will not free this earth with bombs and bullets. Only through the spirit of God and His adopted son will we find the strength and power to free this planet and our own immortal souls. Once you have accepted Isack at His temple, you will never again need to bear another firearm," said Asimond.

"How do they protect Salt Lake City without guns?" asked Scott.

"With the will and power of God," said Asimond, who waved his hand and spoke a few strange words. Slowly the green lights above them disappeared and the mist retreated back into the trees. The aurora had been an illusion, only a few feet above their campsite rather than far up in the sky.

"How did you do that?" asked Paul in shock and disbelief. He was not the only one of them who stood with mouth agape.

"Isack has shown His followers how to use the powers of God. God has blessed me, as I am

one who can be taught to spread His miracles. Some of you may be able to learn as well," answered Asimond who seemed pleased at their astonishment.

And they were amazed at what he had done. Even Deacon looked around disbelievingly through a swollen eye at the empty night sky and retreating mist.

"One must remember to put the symbol on your clothing, or beside your campsite to show your acceptance of our Lord. It will allow you to avoid any nasty encounters like this in the future. The I within the eye," said Asimond with a smile and turned his shoulder to show them a picture of the symbol.

"We certainly learned our lesson after tonight," said Liv doing her best to join in with Paul's sham. She gave her prettiest smile and spoke in her most obedient tone.

"Indeed, sister, I'm glad you have. Hmmm… *you* will make a good initiate; perhaps Isack will take you on personally," replied Asimond with a strange tone in his voice. Behind him many of the initiates snickered loudly.

Liv continued to simper. "I hope I can be so lucky."

"Indeed," said Asimond.

"We've lost all of our gear," said Scott quickly trying out an idea that jumped into his head. "Since we're all…you know…trying to serve Isack and all…maybe you can help us out, Isack's followers need to stick—"

There wasn't a member of the group who didn't feel that Scott was going to give them away somehow and Liv was the first to interrupt his rant. "Now! Scott! No need to ask too much of these men… right?"

"I just thought—" answered Scott, annoyed at being interrupted.

"No need to ask," said Asimond who answered Scott's question bluntly. "For you will get nothing from us. No food, no weapons, and most certainly no directions or advice. All Pilgrims must find their own way to the adopted Son. It is your test. It is your struggle. Only those who have passed

through the fire, and shown that they are worthy, are allowed into the walled City of Salt Lake. You are on your own, but God will see you through to your destination if He sees fit. I cannot, and would not, give a starving pilgrim a morsel of food, or even a hand to help them up if they fell."

The group members looked at each other. Scott mumbled "What a load," under his breath, but loud enough that even Asimond heard.

"Tell us then, my young Pilgrim, why have *you* chosen to seek out Isack?" asked Asimond sternly.

Scott's eyes widened. He looked over at Paul and took his time before answering. "I uh…well...he's…just so darned great."

Paul struggled to keep his hand from slapping his forehead.

"Interesting. So tell me: what is it that is so *darned* great about our Lord Isack?" asked Asimond with a curious expression on his face.

"Well, you see…" said Scott, agitated.

"Scott, you know all about his—" interrupted Paul trying to help him out of the spiraling situation.

"No!" said Asimond. "Let the brother answer for himself."

Scott had lost all the moisture in his mouth. It was suddenly like he was onstage trying to do a speech in front of a huge crowd. Except, if he didn't get it right, his punishment would likely be a knife in the back.

"Well, Isack…he travelled into the portals…and he came back," said Scott nervously.

"Yes, that much is known to everyone," said Asimond, now openly angry with Scott's ignorance. "How can you be seeking someone you know nothing about?"

"Yeah, well, that's not all," said Scott who was now grasping at straws. There was a silence among them and it seemed it would only take a sudden move or an off sound to set the fighting back in motion. A fight they would not win. Paul's knuckles whitened on the rifle and he struggled not to

lift the barrel away from the ground.

Sweat beaded on Scott's forehead, and as Asimond's face turned to rage some of the radio commercial they had heard while in the car jumped into Scott's head. "Isack! He cures the sick. Isack! He brings storm from the calm. Isack! He fights the monsters with fireballs and lightning bolts and crazy ass insane wild magical powers. Isack! His power is matched only by his benevolence. Isack! He's just a… darned…I mean, wonderful…great…adopted son of God." Scott gave the same expression to Asimond he used to give to his teachers at school when answering a question that he didn't know. A combination of doubt and embarrassment.

Asimond's expression slowly cleared. He looked like he was struggling not to burst into laughter. "That, my young Pilgrim, was one of the funniest things I have heard in a very long time."

A sense of relief came over everyone in the clearing. Blood returned to Paul's knuckles.

After a few moments Asimond spoke again, still with a large smile on his face. "I sense at least some of you may yet seek the path of the light." His eyes lingered on Liv. "And thus we will leave you to your journey. But do not forget that only toward Isack, toward Utah, will you find the light, and only there will you find comfort and meaning in this shattered world. May you find the light, my young Pilgrims."

Asimond and his zealots turned and walked quickly out of the clearing leaving the seven group members swelling and bleeding in the darkness. They stood in silence for a short time to make sure that they were in fact alone. The fire died down and the cold set in.

"Maybe we should get into the shed, huh?" asked Deacon, whose eye continued to swell.

"And bar the door," said Wes, who also sported some nasty scratches on his face and a badly split lip.

"*Crazy-ass-insane-wild-magical-powers*?" asked Paul with a wry smile as they walked. "Storm *from* the calm?"

"Oh, shut up," was all Scott could come up with in reply.

Chapter 18 – The Tortoise and the Hare

Wesley David - Entry # 18

If it's not one thing, it's a goddamned other.

My lip is as fat as Scott used to be. My face is scratched, and my neck and jaw are so sore I can barely move them. Attacked by religious assholes – as if there's not enough to worry about, now we got to keep an eye out for the choirboys. Zealots for Isack, hanging and beating people across the countryside! What a fun religion it must be.

I don't know how, and I don't know if, it was some kind of trick, but my eyes saw yet another thing my mind cannot believe. Magic. Or as close to what I would imagine magic to be, anyway. Not Penn and Teller card tricks or David Blaine illusions. I'm talking stuff that you would see in a movie. Although, it may have been a trick. Paul swears it wasn't what it looked like. Or it may have been some sort of technology or gadget that I don't understand. Either way, you can add it to the growing "I can't believe this is real" pile. This can't be real, it can't be happening. But it is. My lip is bleeding, my neck aches, I'm burping up goat meat cooked in a garbage can and I'm freezing cold. So how can this not be real? I guess it's the fact that I saw a man shut off the northern lights with the flick of his wrist. I think it's got something to do with the mist; maybe there is some way to control it.

So I don't know what we're going to do now. This shed is not a good place to stay for any period of time and I think we all would like to put some distance between us and Asimond and his hoods. What kind of name is Asimond, anyway? He probably changed it to sound more biblical, or more like something from a Harry Potrter novel. It doesn't sound like something you would name your kid to me.

I suspect we'll stay here at least another day. We've still got some goat to eat, and many bruises to heal. I just hope we don't get any fresh ones for a while.

* * *

Scott had trouble sleeping. He kept thinking about how often he looked like an idiot in the last little while. It started by getting lost in the mist after his bathroom break, then he was caught stealing the ravioli, and now he'd acted like a fool in front of this Asimond character. He was sure there were also other instances that he couldn't remember. *That's enough of this shit,* he thought, *I may be the funny guy, but they're supposed to be laughing at my jokes, not at me.*

"Scott, are you okay?" whispered Deacon through the darkness of the shed. "It's a good thing I'm on guard duty and not trying to sleep, cause your tossin' and turnin' would be keeping me awake. What's on your mind?" Deacon sat quietly on a garbage can looking at him in the darkness. His eyes reflecting light reminded Scott of an animal in the headlights.

Scott didn't feel like bringing up what was bothering him. He didn't know who else was awake and listening, but even if he felt like talking to Deacon about some of the recent events, he would only bring it up when they were alone. Scott's mind jumped to some of the other thoughts in his head.

"What did you think of that magic today?" asked Scott quietly.

"Magic? I suppose you could call it that. Yeah, that's been on my mind too," admitted Deacon in reply. "I don't know. How's that for an answer? I don't know. I guess it's some sort of special power. What else could it be? But to tell you the truth it didn't seem very spectacular to me."

"Paul seems to think it was some sort of smoke and mirrors trick. Is he still outside walking around?" Deacon nodded. Scott continued, "But there's no way that's the case. Mounting mirrors and vacuum units in the middle of this forest would be a pretty difficult thing, even for Houdini."

"It would have been a tough set up," agreed Deacon with a sigh. "Remember when you were a kid, and your uncle would pull a quarter out of your ear?"

"No, not really," said Scott with a smile.

"Thanks for helping out with the conversation, asshole, *that's great*. Well, you do know *some* kids had uncles, and *these* uncles would pull quarters from their ears?"

"Yeah, yeah, go on," said Scott.

"I think it's kinda like that for us. We're like the little ignorant kids that are completely amazed to see some mist and lights move about. We're astounded, we can't believe it…but maybe in a few years, or after we grow up a little, it will seem like a silly trick you would pull on a young child. Maybe we just don't see the whole picture yet."

"No, I don't think that," said Scott. This time his answer was serious.

"Well, then, genius, what do *you* think happened?" asked Deacon, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

"Honestly…I think Isack happened."

"What!" exclaimed Deacon a little too loudly. Some of the girls mumbled in their sleep but no one woke up. Deacon continued in a rushed whisper, "You actually buy into that guy?"

"I don't buy into everything I've heard and seen about him, but there are some pretty astounding things that can't be denied," said Scott.

"Like what?"

"That people are safe in Salt Lake City. And you can't deny what we saw today, a trick or not, it was still amazing. And why are so many people flocking to him? Why does he have followers willing to kick the shit out of us, and die for him? How did he convince all those young guys, likely guys who grew up just like us, to follow him? They can't all be idiots," said Scott.

"Maybe he's a natural leader, I don't know. Or maybe he does have some special power, but I've never been the religious type. I don't trust anyone that forces you to follow them," said Deacon.

"Yeah, I suppose, I don't like that part of it, either. But maybe…maybe if we make it to the coast…if it's bad there…maybe we could head for Utah. Even if it's just to have a place where we can get a good night's sleep and three—hell, *one*—square meal a day," mused Scott.

"I guess we can burn that bridge if, and when, we get to it," said Deacon abruptly. He thought about the words Sara had whispered to him about Utah. If it ever came to actually going there, they

would likely split up as a group. Paul would never agree to go, and Deacon suspected that Jen would. In fact, he *knew* what direction she would take if she called the shots. She did not fight very hard when they were attacked earlier in the night, and she seemed far too interested and astounded by Asimond and his words. If Scott could buy into that guy than she probably thought Utah was the Promised Land and Isack was her God. The parting words of Sara Williams once again came into his mind and he shook his head. Deacon heard many things about Isack and Utah, and most of them sounded good. But he had experience with situations that were too good to be true.

They always were.

* * *

They awoke to a crisp mountain morning with headaches and sore muscles and realized Paul wasn't among them.

"You guys have to come outside and check this out," Paul said, bursting through the door, an ear-splitting grin on his face.

"I think I'd rather sleep," replied Scott.

The others were far more interested in what Paul had found and made their way to the door shivering with the early morning cold. They stepped outside to find a hazy day, thick enough that the mountain peaks in the distance looked like they were blocked with smog or pollution. After a few moments alone, staring at the piece of rope still tied to the rafter, Scott got up and joined the group. Paul gathered them all on the small step that led into the shed.

"Okay, I didn't get much sleep last night," admitted Paul, who looked terrible. His face was scratched up and he had bruises above his forehead and cheek. "So I couldn't get that northern lights trick out of my head. It kept buggin' me and buggin' me. Anyway, I went up into the trees and looked around the clearing here and there ain't no mirrors. Or lights. Or power. Nothing but sap and

chipmunks."

He was wired. Almost like he was on some kind of drug, like speed or coke.

"Anyway, so I sit down here this morning and I think and I think about it. Magic! That's ridiculous, I can't accept it. No way, no how. Anyway, so I'm thinking and thinking and suddenly it comes to me. What if all the shit we have been seeing is in our imagination? What if the mist kinda, well, lets what's in your mind play out. Kinda like a movie projector. But it's not much good without a screen to play on, right? Like if you aimed the projector out into the middle of the forest, you wouldn't see anything, eh? But maybe the mist like…well, like, acts as a canvas."

"I'm going back to bed," said Scott sleepily and began to turn around.

"Scott!" yelled Paul loud enough that it startled the morning cobwebs out of their minds. "Give me a goddamn chance, would ya?"

"Okay, sorry…go on, Van Gough, you were saying something about a canvas," answered Scott, still not interested, but willing to pretend if Paul was going to be this passionate.

"Okay, okay, anyway I figured maybe I could do it. Hell, if that Asimond douche bag can do it, why the hell not me too, right?"

Paul was expecting a reply to this question and Deacon gave it to him with a wry smile. "Yeah, Paul, why not?"

"Yeah, yeah, Deek, you think I've gone nuts….Anyway, so I think and I think and suddenly this picture of a rabbit bounces into my head. One of those big hares we keep seeing around, but never seem to catch. You know, the ones that are still brown but starting to show some of the snow white fur poke through. I picture it in my mind. Focus on it."

Paul was almost frantic now with excitement and he garnered the full attention of the group, even Scott listening intently.

"And *bam*!" said Paul waving his arms around in the air. "There's a rabbit sitting off in the distance!"

"Bullshit," laughed Wes.

"You of all people should believe me! You can believe in alien conspiracies, and not this?" answered Paul who sounded hurt.

"My dad used to say, the proof is in the pudding, Paul," said Jen, who sounded more skeptical as Wes.

"Alright," answered Paul who proceeded to grab a large stick and walk off into the clearing. "I'm going to draw an "X" here on the ground. Look at it closely. Either you're going to see a rabbit, or I'm going to need a psychiatrist."

Paul walked back and sat down on a chair, closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. Time passed. Birds chirped. The nearby river bubbled and the pines rustled in the breeze, and no rabbit appeared.

"Dude," said Scott. "I don't even think Freud would have had a chance with a head case like you. You've lost it. Some sleep and a lobotomy might help you out. It's too bad that…HOLY SHIT!"

In the clearing, just a short distance from the X, sat a fat brown rabbit. Its nose clinched and quivered as it stood with its paws in the air. It was obvious the image wasn't real. It did not look nearly as real as the northern lights, or as the severed hand in Lucky's mouth, or even the strange face in the tree. It was hazy, as if there was bad reception on a TV channel, but it *was* there, no denying.

"What? What, you guys? I don't see it," said Deacon realizing that the rest of them saw something from the expressions on their faces.

Wes pointed, with his jaw still dropped, toward the rabbit in the distance. "You can't see that?"

"No way!" exclaimed Scott now wide awake and amazed. "Is it real?" Scott attempted to answer his own question and ran with his hands outstretched toward the specter, but it disappeared before he arrived.

"Have I made believers out of you? Hallelujah! Praise the lord!" said Paul with a sarcastic southern drawl and a big triumphant smile on his face.

Deacon tried to argue that he couldn't see anything, but he was drowned out by the rest of his convinced and excited companions. Paul was suddenly pummeled with requests for images and questions on how he did it, but he was unable to give them a good answer.

"I don't know how yet," said Paul. "It's easy to see that I'm not very good at it…not yet anyway. Even to me the rabbit looked like a fuzzy gray fur ball; not nearly as good as the one I made earlier this morning. I don't know if the lack of sleep and exhaustion is helping me do it, or hurting me. I suspect maybe a bit of both…but here's one thing for sure: last night's magic show wasn't some gift from Isack or God. It was a bullshit trick just like *I* said, a way to play with the mist if you know how. Now, if you will all excuse me, I am going to go and get some sleep."

And with that he trotted triumphantly into the shed and fell asleep immediately on a small pile of tarps. Paul slept very well that day.

* * *

They abandoned the train shed early the next morning. Most of them were happy to see it go. The memories of the man hanging from the rafters kept many of them from sleeping well, and they still showed dark bruises and black eyes from their meeting with Asimond. Paul had spent the previous day sleeping and it allowed him to take the entire nighttime guard shift. He spent most of the night trying to bring back the rabbit and create different shapes with little success as the haze had thinned out over the day. The nighttime sky clouded over during Paul's shift and the group awoke to a steady rain.

Their morning routine changed with the loss of their gear. There were no tents to pack up, no dishes to clean and put away, no hatchets, knives, bedding, cans, coats, guns, or personal belongings to attend to and packing up now took very little time compared to what they were accustomed to. Paul rolled up the dried goat meat into a tarp and Scott carried it over his shoulder. Deacon loaded the

garbage can and filled it up halfway with fresh river water. The girls carried nothing more than the shirts on their backs and a sharpened antler or screwdriver in their hands.

"You guys let me know when you're ready for some of my delicious garbage can water, and maybe if you're lucky you can have a swig," joked Deacon as they walked back to the highway.

The girls led the way and kept a steady pace without gear to weigh them down. The rain was only a nuisance as they walked beneath the tall pines back toward the highway, but as they left the tree cover it became cold and miserable.

"Either we walk out here on the highway and get pissed on by a bunch of little drops, or we walk in the trees and get soaked by big fat drops," muttered Scott. "We just can't win."

"Somebody should have some of this water," said Deacon. "This garbage can keeps getting heavier in this rain."

Paul's shaggy hair stuck to his face as they walked. The girls were disheveled and miserable. Thankfully, the temperature became more bearable as the day wore on, but every time they came away from a rock wall out into the open, the breeze would catch their soaked hair and clothes and send a chill down their spines.

"I can honestly say I've never been more miserable in my entire life," admitted Wes as they marched.

"Hey, man, things could be worse," said Scott.

"How the fuck could things be worse, Scott?" asked Liv whose sweater, weighed down with water, sagged over her thin shoulders.

"Well. We could be back in school," said Scott with a forced smile.

"I would kill a man to be back doing differential equations in a warm dry classroom," muttered Paul.

"Well, okay...I guess we could be dead," said Scott, suddenly serious.

The group quieted for a time after the comment. It was probably the next step down. They

agreed after a few hours to stop at the next available place that offered some form of shelter, but nothing came. The Mountain National Parks were just that, parks, with almost nothing in the way of development or habitation. Paul found himself wishing they'd gone around them entirely, at least there would be some form of human settlement to come across. They walked in the rain until their muscles ached, and still nothing appeared.

* * *

"I'm getting some wicked blisters here, my feet are soaked," said Deacon, who tried hard to not be the first to complain, but could put up with it no more. He stopped and sat down on the asphalt.

"C'mon, Deek, don't stop now. We can't be too far away from something, bud. That sign back there said Sunwapta Falls was fifteen kilometers. We can do fifeteen kilometers walking on our hands," urged Paul.

"Alright, but gimme a minute, I'm taking off my shoes," replied Deacon.

The sight of his feet nearly made the rest of them sick. Each foot was one gigantic blister. White skin bubbled with puss and open red sores from the sock down.

"Jesus!" said Liv, rushing to Deacon's side. "Are you okay?" She knelt beside him.

Jen quickly came to Deacon's side as well. The two girls stared at the feet with expressions of revulsion.

"Scott, how are *your* feet?" demanded Jen.

"They've been better, but they're not nearly as bad as those bloody stumps," replied Scott, staring in disgust.

"Great, because you're taking the water and Wes is getting the food. The girls and I will share the rest of the tarps. Deacon has carried enough," said Jen.

Scott didn't argue, he was happy to help take the load off Deacon after the sight of his feet.

"We're gonna need to get you some new footwear, Deacon," said Wes with concern.

"Why don't we start by getting him a roof over his head," said Paul, helping Deacon back up.

They continued on until their feet and stomachs allowed them to go no further. The companions stopped and had a quiet lunch in the middle of the highway on the double yellow line. The goat meat was cold, wet, and tough and offered them little comfort as the steady rain continued to drench them. Liv gagged occasionally as she ate.

"This godforsaken rain," complained Paul. "It slows down and slows down and suddenly there's a hint of blue sky and you think the sun's gonna come out, and *wham*! It starts up, harder than ever."

"If we don't find some shelter tonight we're in trouble," said Wes, wringing the water from his shirt. His skin showed the washboard of his stomach and the outline of his ribcage. They also needed more, and better quality, nourishment.

"Okay, everyone. Up," said Paul. "We've got to move it. Wes is right, we need to find something to sleep under tonight."

There was some grumbling and groaning but they all got up and carried on. The road ahead curved but was thankfully heading downhill for the most part. They walked at a slow pace as even Paul was too tired to push them any harder.

"Hey, look! A highway help phone!" said Scott who happily ran toward it. They had already passed a few of them on their journey, placed every twenty kilometers for travelers who in years long gone had suffered a breakdown or an emergency. Scott picked up the phone, with a cut cord dangling at his feet, and talked loudly into it. "Yes, Mario's Pizza please….Yes, hello. Can I get two meat lovers…oh wait, sorry Liv, make that one meat lovers and one vegetarian pizza, please. Um, I think it will definitely have to be Visa. Address? Umm…number 1, Wet, Miserable Mountain Road, Jasper, Alberta, Canada. Great, how long is that gonna be? Ten years, now that's ridiculous!"

Scott got most of them laughing, half from exhaustion and frustration.

"There's a sign up ahead," said Paul. "You guys take a break, I'm gonna check it out."

Liv grabbed Paul's shoulders and squinted. "It says, Sunwapta Falls Resort: Two Kilometers!"

"Thank the Lord," said Jen. Everyone shared her relief.

"Deacon, do your feet have two clicks left on them?" asked Paul, relieved they might have some sort of shelter for the night.

"Lead on," answered Deacon.

"When we get there it doesn't mean we're home free," said Paul as they carried on with the march. "Keep your eyes peeled on the way up."

* * *

The two kilometer walk led them off the highway and steeply uphill on a thin and poorly paved mountain road. Deacon put his shoes back on as rocks and sticks littered the road, which looked like it had not been used in years. As they arrived at a sign for the resort, the rain finally stopped. The sign read:

SUNWAPTA FALLS

A BUNGALOW SYTLE RESORT

WITHIN 5 MINUTES' WALK OF THE BEAUTIFUL SUNWAPTA FALLS

Open April 1st through September 30th

Ask about our seniors' discount!

Paul stopped them all and spoke. "Okay Scott, you grab the axe and come with me. The rest of you wait in that clearing of trees for us to come back. Wes, please hold onto that dog, the last thing we need is for it to spook us while we scope out the place." They all agreed to Paul's requests, happy to sit down after the arduous walk. Paul and Scott headed quietly into the resort.

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Paul was nervous as he and Scott walked carefully through the forest around the far side of the resort. It was a conglomeration of bungalow and loft style cottages that seemed like they would have been a comfortable place to stay years before, if a little rustic. They were now in a state of disrepair. They had likely only been closed for two years but in that time windows had broken, siding had fallen off, and branches and leaves littered the roofs and grounds. Paul stopped Scott when they got close to the main building and they lay silently on the wet ground and surveyed it.

After fifteen minutes of silence Paul got up and brushed the wet pine needles from his clothes. Scott followed his example.

"Let's check out the office first," whispered Paul. "Then we'll get ourselves the nicest goddamn cabin in this place."

"I call the honeymoon suite," replied Scott.

They quietly made their way through the complex. Paul walked in front, tight alongside the cabin walls. They stopped at each window they came by and looked inside, finding nothing but empty and orderly suites. Paul felt naked walking through the complex. There was no way for them scope out every cabin, and he had a nervous feeling he would turn a corner to find a pack of Fangs waiting for him. The area was too quiet, and too perfect. It was the kind of place a smart family would have escaped to and made a home out of. It was nicely tucked away, close to fresh water, and teeming with wildlife. Paul kept telling himself a place like this couldn't be empty, but from what they could see and hear, it was.

They made their way to the main office building of the complex and found the front door locked. A weathered, handwritten note was taped to it: *Closed temporarily due to world events.* It was dated April 30th from the year before.

"I wonder if they just abandoned this place?" asked Paul to himself.

"I can't believe no one has been here—not even Creepers. That's pretty lucky," said Scott.

The front door was heavy and there was no way they could smash their way through it without a lot of noise and a lot of work. Half an hour of solid kicks and shoulders might bust the heavy wooden doors open, but they decided to try to find a less destructive method first. They walked around the sides of the building but found only groups of skinny windows they had no hope of fitting through. There were other windows around the building, but the moldings were also too thin to fit through; not even Liv would have any luck.

"Christ, this place is like Fort Knox," complained Scott.

"It was probably designed that way. They kept it closed during the winter, and likely didn't want uninvited guests."

Paul peered through one of the small side windows. The office inside also looked undisturbed. He could clearly see the bright interior couches and front lobby. Mounted on the walls were the heads of caribou, elk, and large fish. There was a cover of dust inside, and Paul could make out large motes dancing across the wooden floor. A massive stone fireplace was set in the main room.

"I wonder if we could get in through the fireplace?" asked Scott, who also peered in through a nearby window.

"I'm pretty sure you wouldn't fit, Santa," answered Paul. "What I want to know is, why is it so bright in there?"

"Hey, I think there's a skylight!" said Scott excitedly. Paul smiled. They found their way in.

* * *

The resort was surrounded by tall pines that towered over the small cabins. They found that there was more than one tree offering them reasonable access to the roof of the main building. The

climb up turned out to be a bit more of a struggle than they expected. An angry squirrel chattered madly as they climbed, Paul much more easily than Scott. It was a substantial leap from the tree, but eventually both of them stood on the shingled roof with weapons in hand. They were covered in sap, and Scott's hand stuck to Deacon's axe without even having to hold it.

"Hey, fat ass, congratulations on getting up; I thought for sure the tree was gonna snap. And you haven't smelled this good for a long time buddy, pine fresh," joked Paul as they struggled to catch their breath.

"Yeah, well, you still smell as bad as you always have," huffed Scott.

The bank of skylights were easy enough to find but were far higher on the steep roof than they had hoped. The skylights were the round plastic type and it did not take them long to unscrew the already loose plastic frame from the molding. Paul handed the large clear plastic shell to Scott, who nonchalantly tossed it into the woods below with a crash that echoed throughout the forest.

"Jesus Christ," said Paul in an angry whisper. "Could you try not to attract the whole world's attention? Just all the creatures in the park will do."

Scott shrugged in reply. They both looked into the opening and saw it was a twenty foot drop onto a large coffee table covered with now dead flowers and vases.

"I suppose it's safe to assume that I'm gonna be making the jump here, huh?" asked Paul wryly.

Scott grinned. "My fat ass is gonna hit a lot harder than yours, right?"

Paul looked down again into the building. The table was thankfully made of wood, not glass, and would hopefully take some of the impact from his fall.

"Okay, I'm gonna hang off the edge, then you're going to lower me down as far as you can—that should make the drop only twelve feet at most. Hopefully I can avoid a broken ankle…or neck," muttered Paul.

"I suppose bringing up how useful a rope would be right now wouldn't do much good," said

Scott.

"Do you have a rope?" asked Paul.

"Nope."

"Then shut up."

Paul placed the rifle and axe on the far side of the remaining plastic panels to prevent them from falling to the ground and lowered himself awkwardly, feet first, into the hole. It wasn't until he hung from the frame of the skylight Paul realized the drop was farther than first thought. Scott laid down on the roof, took both of Paul's hands and let him down another couple feet. Scott's arms shook with strain from holding Paul's weight, and the now heated sap clinging to their hands began to act more as a lubricant than a glue.

"No turning back now, Pauly," said Scott.

Paul looked up at him. "If I break a leg I'm gonna be in big trouble out here."

"Ah, don't worry pal," replied Scott. "If you break your leg, we'll just shoot ya."

And with that the grip slipped and Paul fell. The crash made the noise from the skylight Scott tossed seemed tranquil in comparison. Vases and bowls crashed around, and the entire coffee table exploded underneath Paul. The commotion of it all echoed through the forest. Scott wondered if the sound would bring Deacon and Wes running to investigate. It took some time for all the glass and wood to stop spinning and bouncing.

"Holy shit! Paul, are you okay?" Scott called down.

All that came from inside the building was a moan, but it seemed he was okay for the most part.

"Hey Paul, *try not to attract the whole world's attention*!" said Scott. "*Just all the creatures in the park will do.*"

Scott wasn't sure, but he thought he could hear Paul, sprawled out on the floor of the building, quietly laughing.

Chapter 19 – The Siege

Wesley David - Entry # 19

Our situation has improved substantially since my last entry. Not only are the seven of us filled with chocolate, soda pop, and snack food, we're also relaxing on mattresses with clean bedding and a roof over our heads. A mattress! Hallelujah! Well—the beds may be a bit lumpy, and the bedding smells a bit stale, but it sure as hell beats a concrete floor and tarps.

We've got a fire burning in the fireplace of the secure main building of the Sunwapta Falls Resort. This place was a tough cookie to crack: skinny windows and heavy doors and locks. But what is even better than the warmth and security is the loot we've found here. A full vending machine loaded with everything from chocolate bars and candies, to stale chips and bottles of Aspirin (which Paul has taken many of, for a sprained ankle and a nasty bump on his head after jumping down from a skylight to get in). As I write this I'm drinking a Coke. A Coke!

It's a victory for us, one of very few we've had lately, and we're making the most of it.

We haven't even begun to search all of the cabins and sheds in the resort. Who knows what we'll find? Ryan used to say, "If you search enough graves you're bound to find one that hasn't been robbed." He sure was right about that. Man, I wish he was here with us to enjoy this.

It's nice to write something positive in this journal for once. At least you can read this one little entry, and know that for one night, on this miserable journey, we were on top of the world.

* * *

"What kind are those?" asked Deacon as he nibbled on a large potato chip like a chipmunk would chew on an acorn.

"It's supposed to be sour cream and onion, although it tastes kinda sour now. Still the tastiest

thing I've had in…well, what seems like forever," replied Scott who stuffed the entire chip into his mouth and crunched on it with a big stupid smile.

The seven of them relaxed together in the lobby of the Sunwapta Falls Resort. After gathering mattresses from the nearby cabins, Scott, Wes, and surprisingly Liv, spent the rest of the day collecting wood. They managed to gather enough for a fire to burn through the night in the large slate fireplace of the lobby. It didn't offer the warmth a gas furnace might, but they stayed comfortable tucked into the many blankets and bedding they found. Deacon's feet were bothering him enough that he left the heavy lifting and hauling to the others. Jen and Anna spent the evening cleaning their new home, including the mess Paul made when smashing down on the coffee tables and vases. They also made beds for everyone, and did their best to make the lobby feel more comfortable and home-like. Paul did little more than lie on a couch and insist that they take it easy on the junk food and pop, although he himself could not resist devouring a couple of Snickers bars. When all the work was done they settled down by the fire, warm, full, and generally as happy as they could be.

"Hey, Liv, you want some goat with those Cheetos?" asked Deacon, who waved a dry stingy piece of meat at her. His blistered feet poked out from beneath his blanket off the edge of a long couch. They glowed crimson, with big hunks of white skin hanging, and looked like they hurt like hell. He swallowed down some of Paul's Aspirin.

"I'll pass, but thanks for the offer," answered Liv with a bright smile from the nearby couch. "That stuff is disgusting."

"It's all we've got for protein and these chocolate bars won't last forever…so don't go gobbling all of it down tonight!" cautioned Paul, who had a wet cloth on both his head and his ankle. His sprain was an excuse for them to spend at least a few days at the resort, although most of them knew they would likely have stayed there for some time, regardless of his ankle, after the week they'd been through.

"Maybe we should split it all up and that way we can avoid fighting, and keep *Hitler* over there

from complaining every time we want to eat something," suggested Scott.

"If we do that you'll be done *your* share before the morning, fat ass," said Paul under the cover of his wet cloth.

"It's not that bad of an idea," suggested Jen as she snuggled into Deacon's arms on the couch. "At least we won't be squabbling over who ate and drank what, and how much, and there's always the goat meat for Scott after he eats his share."

After a short discussion, Paul was won over. Most of them didn't want to have to ask for his permission every time they took something from the goody pile. They struggled for a time to decide a fair way to choose who would get to pick first, eventually solving the problem by making numbers from Wes's notebook and drawing them out of a vase. Jen got to pick first, and took far too long to decide. There was a good deal of loot to distribute, over one hundred chocolate bars, snacks, bottles of Aspirin, gum, and candy. They also found a large unopened box of pillow mints in the back, which they split evenly between them. Each of them seemed to get exactly what they wanted. Paul focused first on the Aspirin and Tums, but realized after he'd taken four bottles and three rolls that he would end up having to share it anyway. In the end it was a sacrifice he made for the rest of them. Jen focused on the gum and candy as she had her mind on the long trip ahead. Anna and Liv both went straight for the chocolate, and chose it until there was none left, picking against each other right from the start. Scott, not surprisingly, chose nothing but the bags of potato chips, cheese twists, and assorted salted snacks until they were gone, pilling them up greedily from his favourites to his next favourites. Everyone told him they were stale, but he could care less, and eyed the snack bags like a child eyed presents on Christmas morning. Deacon picked cans of pop until the rest of them began choosing the pop also, as it was the most plentiful of the choices. Wes was the generalist of the group, taking a little bit of everything, and in the end was the only one who didn't have to use his choices as a form a currency to barter with over the coming days. Exchanging selections turned into very serious negotiations, sometimes involving three way trades, hurt feelings, and yelling, but it was all in good

fun as they were well fed and in good spirits. They also found board games and a deck of cards in the back lunchroom and gambled a little bit. After the games finished, Deacon ended up with far less orange pop than he would have liked.

They spent three uninterrupted days at the Sunwapta Falls Resort before they considered moving again. Paul's ankle was taking less time to heal than they expected, and by the end of the second day he was already limping around the place barking orders like his usual self. They spent the time investigating some of the cabins, gathering firewood, and generally relaxing. The thunder of the nearby waterfall roared nonstop, and it provided a steady lullaby as they slept and relaxed. The river was freezing cold, far too cold for swimming for any extended period of time. Beyond the base of the falls was a small crystal pool they used for laundry, drinking water, and the occasional bath. A bath for most of them consisted of spending fifteen minutes gathering enough courage to jump in for a ten second soak. On the third day they all took a hot bath, one after another in the closest cabin. The water was hauled from the river via garbage can and cleaning pail and boiled over the fireplace before being dumped into the tub. The water was clean and refreshing and made for the most relaxing moment they'd enjoyed for a very long time.

* * *

Just a half an hour with no interruptions and I won't ask for anything else ever again, thought Liv as she lowered her body into water that was almost too hot. She volunteered herself to go first. It was either first or last for her. The heat from the water soaked deeply into her muscles and she couldn't help but moan "Gawd damn!" when her entire body was immersed. *If I could have one little cigarette right now, one drag, I could die happy.*

* * *

Paul felt a little guilty about taking the bath, but he was still willing to indulge. He was unable, not unwilling, to haul the water up for his bath and he was thankful his companions were kind enough to do it for him. Paul lifted his sore ankle out of the water and stared at it in the dim light of the hotel bathroom. It was purple and blue with bruises, and still swollen, but thankfully not broken. *If it wasn't for me and my ankle they never would've got in, so let 'em haul some water,* thought Paul, satisfied. He knew if the ankle was seriously torn or broken it would mean a lifetime of limping for him, or worse. He couldn't afford to be the weakest link in the group, either physically or mentally. The weakest link was left by the pack as a sacrifice for the others. He had already made too many sacrifices.

* * *

Anna came up with the idea of the bath. It was much nicer than risking a heart attack jumping into the frozen river like some of the lunatics she used to see on TV that would happily jump into a frigid lake in the middle of winter. She managed to convince the others that hauling a few heavy loads of water from the river, and carrying a few pots of boiling water to the cabin, would be worth their while. As she sank into the warmth of the water she knew she was right, and that they would, and should, be thanking her for the idea. She missed things like this. Time alone, in warmth, and silence. Time alone to herself and to her thoughts. Her muscles relaxed and the pictures and memories of the past flooded into her mind. *Jesus, Anna, get a grip!* A lump formed in her throat, but she could not stop her emotions from welling up. Tears came, and she wept for most of her time in the bath. Her salty tears mixed with the bath water, but it was all washed away down the drain when she was finished.

* * *

Wes was the only one out of them who argued against the bath. Paul's ankle was injured, and Deacon was impaired by his blisters, so a great deal of the work of hauling the water came down onto him and Scott. The girls spent their time finding important things to do, like watching the water boil, while they heaved the heavy buckets to and fro. But it was all worth it when he submersed himself into the warmth of the bath water. Wes had the foresight to place a can of pop in a sink filled with the frigid river water to cool while he hauled the buckets, and he now cracked it open and drank deeply. The cold drink flowed down his throat while he sat in the steaming water. *Now this...this I could get used to.* The sweat of the day's labour and the tension in his head and muscles melted away. Wes took the longest bath out of them all.

* * *

"C'mon, Wes, my water's gonna be cold!" complained Jen through the thin wooden door. By the time she finally got Wes out, and her own water in, it was far from hot, but she refused to allow it to ruin her time. Deacon was after her, so she knew she could bathe into his time and he wouldn't complain. He seldom did. She thoroughly rubbed every muscle on her body in the water and quietly sang an old hymn to herself. When she finally got out her hands and feet were wrinkled and pink.

* * *

The hot water stung Deacon's feet as he got into the tub and it took a painful moment for them to adjust to the heat. It was the first time in a while he was alone with his own naked body and he couldn't believe how it looked in the unbroken bathroom mirror. His muscles were taut and his

abdominals showed hard on his stomach. He could see the juts of his bones and tendons as he rubbed and washed himself. Scabs and pieces of dead skin fell from his blistered feet, the road burn from his face, his head, and even some of the final dried blood from the cuts to his chest. Cuts from the fingers of the young girl they killed. The young girl he couldn't save. *That these muscles couldn't carry.* The words of Sara Williams came into his mind when she grabbed him, whispered into his ear, and handed him the note. Deacon spent the least time bathing that day. His thoughts wouldn't let him rest, and no amount of bathing would get him clean.

* * *

Scott was happy to go last, as it meant no one would bother him to hurry. No one would bitch or whine at him for one thing or another, and all of the hauling would be complete. Scott sank his body into the hot water and moaned. It was a long time since he'd had a bath. He could see a greasy film form on the water around himself as he washed and scrubbed with the assorted hotel soaps. *Finally, I'm alone to myself.* Images of Liv, Jen, and even Anna bathing in the tub before him crept into his mind along with older images of them washing themselves naked in rivers and streams. He had collected a large amount of this material in his head over the course of their travels. *Finally, alone to myself.*

* * *

When the tendrils of mist began to creep into the main building of the Sunwapta Resort most of the group was already asleep. Only Deacon and Scott were awake, playing a game of cribbage in which Deacon was preparing to finally skunk his friend. They agreed to put one of Deacon's orange

pops against a bag of Scott's salt and vinegar chips.

"Check that out," said Scott, who first noticed the encroaching mist. Tentacles made their way under the small crack below the front door, and slowly dissipated when they mixed with the warmth of the room.

"Oh, man," said Deacon. "That can't be good for business."

"Think we should wake up Paul?" asked Scott.

"No. What's he gonna do anyway? Pull a rabbit out of his hat? Sit tight, maybe letting everyone sleep through it will be for the best."

They continued to play on, though with less enthusiasm, as fingers of mist curled in through the cracks around the windows, under the front door and through the round air ducts in the ceiling. Deacon threw more wood on the fire, to give more light, as the room became increasingly hazy, but it did little good. Soon the entire main area was covered in light smog. It was nothing like the soup they'd been through before, but it was thick.

"Maybe we should wake everyone up," said Scott, agitated by the eeriness of the situation and his memories of being alone in the mist.

"Naw," replied Deacon. "We're gonna have to get used to it one of these days. We've all slept through it before, tonight should be no different."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," agreed Scott. "Every time I see that stuff I get freaked out. Nothing good ever happens when it's around."

They continued to play cards in the mist under the glow of the fire. They were ready to quit for the night, after Deacon found a way to lose yet again, when they both saw a shape pass by one of the skinny outside windows.

"What the hell was that?" asked Scott.

"I don't know…probably just an animal. There are deer all over the place around here," said Deacon.

"You don't sound too convinced," said Scott.

"That's because I'm not too convinced," answered Deacon.

"Now do you think we should wake up Paul?" asked Scott.

Deacon was given no time to reply as there was a sudden flurry of hard knocks on the front door. The card players stared at each other wide eyed.

"Let me in!" screamed a man's voice from behind the door. "Please, there's no time."

Scott jumped up and headed toward the door but Paul, who was already up and awake, stopped him. The frantic knocking brought everyone out their sleep.

"Hold on, Scott, it could be a trick," said Paul. "We don't know who this—"

"PLEASE!" screamed the voice. "They're coming, they're right behind me!" The man behind the door was desperate, and exhausted, as he could barely get the words out from his struggle for breath.

"Jesus, Paul, let him in!" said Jen from her couch.

Paul pointed the loaded rifle at the door, and motioned to Scott to open it. They had not yet come across a creature that could speak so Paul decided the person behind the door was either a figment of their imaginations, or a real human being. Deacon stood by the door with his axe and Wes held a kitchen knife they'd found in one of the nearby cabins.

"Do it, Scott," said Paul as the fist continued to pound on the door. "I've got him covered."

Scott reached forward and unlocked the main bolt and the man stumbled inside with such force that he knocked Scott backward.

"Close it! Close it!" cried the man who turned and struggled to push back the door. Mist bellowed into the cabin through the opening as Deacon jumped to slam it closed, but it was suddenly blocked by numerous black appendages.

"Oh, my God," muttered Jen.

Deacon, Scott, and the strange man barely managed to keep the door from bursting open.

A blast erupted from Paul's rifle and a black spider-like leg exploded in the door entrance. It helped them close the door further but the creatures and their appendages still held the door ajar. It was only then they got a good look at the man they let in. He wore a short salt and pepper beard and his face looked old and lined, but his body and posture still showed physical strength. He wore a weather stained black cloak and carried a small bag, and a fiddle, that was still spinning on the floor beside him.

"Fire again, Paul!" shouted Deacon as the door slowly opened in on them.

Paul struggled with the thought. He instinctively loaded the rifle again as soon as the first shot went off, but that left him with only four more bullets. Those four bullets were for food, protection, and survival, and even in a situation like this Paul conserved. His rifle gave him power.

"For the stars, boy! Shoot!" screamed the bearded man.

Paul let another blast fly. But that was it. It was all he could part with. A long black hand took this shot and it exploded and fell to the floor. A high pitched scream erupted from outside, but still the door did not shut. Paul dropped the rifle and ran to the door, struggling for a place to grab on and push. The bearded man let go of the door as Paul came to their aid, and drew a long knife from his belt and slashed at the terrible hands and feet blocking the door from closing. The girls also came to the door, as it was clear they were going to need every ounce of strength they could to close it. Even Anna instinctively jumped up and pushed against Scott with all her might. They all pushed together and with the repeated hacking and slashing of the man's blade, the door finally came to a close, popping off one long black finger.

When the lock clicked shut Paul made an impressive dive for his rifle that showed no evidence of a sprained ankle. He quickly turned and pointed the barrel directly at the head of the bearded man. The man sat on the floor, oblivious to Paul's aim. The group stood above him, still bracing the now locked door with what remained of their strength. The attempt against the door stopped but they were not going to take any chances. Wes and the girls moved away and heaved one of the large couches

against the door.

"I've found you," gasped the bearded man with the drenched blade still in his hands.

"I've finally found you."

* * *

Paul intended to ask the man what he was talking about but the attack suddenly recommenced. The small windows along the sides of the building were too skinny to allow the creatures inside, but that did not stop them from smashing the windows open and reaching in their long black arms to grasp for prey. The mist and the cold poured in through the shattered windows, and the light from the fire made the thick haze in the lobby flicker a sickening orange. Outstretched arms grasped and clawed aimlessly like the hands of the dead rising from the soil of an old graveyard. Everyone took to defending the building, except for Scott and Wes, who stayed steadfast against the main door. Deacon hacked relentlessly with his axe at the grasping arms and hands, leaving piles of fingers and black blood on the fine hardwood floor. The girls also slashed away, along with the now upright bearded man, at the appendages, while Paul bashed at them with the butt of his rifle. Even Lucky fiercely bit and barked at the hands. The inside of the lobby was a scene of chaos.

"What did you bring on us?" yelled Paul at the old man who was wearily swinging at the hands with his blade. He appeared beyond exhaustion and almost hazy himself.

"Too many I'm afraid!" said the old man. "Even if we can fight them until they all have no fingers, they will wait until they grow back. Or they will burn us alive in here."

"Jesus Christ," breathed Deacon.

Anna was keening. It was too much like her parents. Too much like the night they lost Ryan. She thought maybe she was trapped in a repeating nightmare, but she knew that no pinch was going to wake her up.

"You can stop this!" said the man to Paul. "You have the ability!"

Paul didn't even have a chance to soak in what the man said when suddenly a black hand wrapped its fingers around Lucky, and threatened to pull the young dog out the window.

"No!" screamed Wes, who dove from the front door and grabbed at the black hand holding the dog. They struggled over Lucky, Wes and an arm that seemed to have no body. The dog let out a horrible wail of pain unlike anything they'd ever heard come from an animal before. Lucky was being squeezed to death. Wes looked out the thin window as he struggled, and saw the smile on the face of the Creeper behind. Its dagger like teeth reflected the moonlight. Wes could see intelligence in the eyes staring back at him, almost like the creature knew that it would dine on his flesh very soon. If the monster's head were not too big to fit through the window, Lucky would already have those teeth closed around her.

Scott also attempted to come to Lucky's aid, but a smash erupted against the front door and it forced Scott and Deacon to jump back to secure it. If the front door failed, all was lost.

"Paul, do something!" gasped Wes, still struggling over the dog.

"Speak, old man! How can we stop this?" yelled Paul.

"You must form the beast, I'm sure the mist is thick enough. Only the scream of the Pargoth will scare them off."

"The what?" asked Paul, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"The screaming beast!"

The situation suddenly went from terrible to horrific as there was another smash against the front door. It was giving in. The moldings around the door cracked and pieces of wood fell right on top of Scott and Deacon. Paul fought his instincts not to run to the front door as Wes was now caught, along with the dog, in the grasp of multiple black arms and hands. Jen and Liv dashed to Wes's side. Liv pulled Wes back with all the might her thin arms could give while Jen stabbed at the hands. It seemed hopeless as each hand and arm she slashed pulled back to allow another to quickly replace it.

All of the thin windows of the lodge were broken open now, and they were surrounded by the reaching black arms. From above a pair of the creatures looked down from the open skylight, judging the distance of the drop. It was only a matter of time until one of them found the courage. Paul stood dumfounded in the middle of the room, trying to decide where he was most needed.

"You must form the screaming beast!" yelled the bearded man at Paul.

"Paul, do something!" moaned Jen who was now also caught around her wrist by a thick black hand. Her knife bounced on the floor.

What the old man asked him to do was no different than the rabbit he formed in the mist only a few days before. The memory of the beast was still clear in Paul's mind. The Giant Black. He awoke in the middle of many nights with that scream still echoing in his head. Paul closed his eyes and took in a deep breath of the wet misty air. He could still see the beast's sinewy shape in his mind, its angled sharp antlers. He could see it emerge from behind the trailer. He could again feel the immeasurable fear. Adrenaline surged into his arteries and hummed under the surface of his skin. The smell of the tires spinning on the asphalt filled his nostrils. He saw its cloven feet, and thick midnight black body. He saw the dog like head, and the huge teeth. He saw the beast's mouth sneer at him. It pulled its arms back and took a breath of air that made its chest expand like a balloon and it erupted. It screamed with all its might, and so did Paul.

There were a few remaining unbroken windows in the building before the scream, but not one window or mirror remained unshattered in the entire resort when it was finished. A few of their treasured pop cans exploded from the force of it, and pieces of wood and dust still fell from the ceiling long after it was over from the sheer vibration of the sound. It left them dazed. No one could breathe, or move, while it lasted. When it was over Paul sat with his head hunched over on his knees. The attackers had also been paralyzed by the sound while it lasted and disappeared in its aftermath. The eight of them were all so deafened by the noise that they could not even hear the scuttling and footfalls of the creatures desperately running for their lives.

It was some time before any of them moved. Even Lucky sat motionless in Wes's arms as he lay frozen on the floor beneath a broken window. The mist continued to pour in along with the cold night air. No one spoke; they all sat in the silence, gathering their breath and their thoughts. After a few minutes Paul stumbled to the table and snatched up a half empty pop can and drank.

"Is everyone okay?" asked Paul in a voice so raspy it was difficult to understand. Those that heard him muttered they were. All of their ears rang painfully.

The bearded man stood up after a few moments and wiped his long blade on a rag he pulled from his pocket. They all noticed that the hilt was intricately gilded and the blade slightly curved.

"Well," said the old man with a large smile on his face. "You should have known better than to let me in, although I'm glad you did. You should know by now not all is what it appears to be in the mist. But, you trusted your instincts and…I suppose a thank you is in order."

Chapter 20 – Joshua Siward

Wesley David - Entry # 20

Another attack. I'm lucky again to even be alive to write this. I've never seen so many Creepers in one place before, and I've never seen them with that kind of tenacity and courage, either. One of Paul's visions got us out of it. How he does it I don't know, I don't think I want to know. His ability with it is clear, and it scares the hell out me.

We have an eighth companion, at least for a time it seems.

His name is Joshua, although Paul seems to prefer the title "Old Man." He just looks at Paul when he calls him that and smiles like he knows some sort of joke that we don't. It's not an evil smile, I don't get an evil vibe from the guy, but he sure as hell knows a whole lot more than he's letting on and he sure finds us interesting. Deacon thinks he's nuts, and I kinda think so too, but not slice our throats in the middle of the night nuts…at least I hope not. The haze is thick tonight, and I swear he seems hazy too. Almost like one of Paul's rabbits. I need sleep.

I also had a nice bath today.

* * *

"Explain yourself, old man!" rasped Paul.

They covered the outside windows with bed sheets found in a back storage room. The sheets did little to keep out the cold, but the steady breeze no longer blew through the main area and the mist now poured in more slowly. They sat together on a large couch near the blazing fire.

"And what, *young man,* would you like me to explain?" replied the bearded man in a voice demanding Paul show some respect. He sat across from them on a large single chair inspecting his fiddle for dents and scrapes and occasionally rubbing it with the sleeve of his cloak.

Paul either didn't hear the tone in the man's voice, or didn't care. "Well, for starters, who are you? Where are you from? And why were so many Creepers after you?"

"Hmmm…Creepers. Yes, that's an adequate description I suppose. Quite adequate. But in truth, they are called The Lar, and they are a very nasty bunch by any name."

"No shit," said Scott.

The old man smiled at him. "Yes, no shit, indeed. As for whom I am, well, I suppose a friend or ally is as good a description as any. As for where I am from, well, I think you already know, or suspect the answer. It's somewhere very, very far from here," he chuckled as if he'd said something funny.

"I told you he's crazy, Paul," muttered Deacon who dropped his head into his hands in frustration.

The rest of them stared at the man in awe.

A hundred questions flew through Paul's head and he stammered deciding what to ask first. Answers, this man had answers for them, but Jen interrupted before he got anything out.

"Deacon, don't talk like that, it's rude," said Jen. "I'm sure our guest has a name, why don't we start by getting that, then maybe Paul can continue on with the interrogation."

The old man chuckled to himself again and gave Jen a warm smile and nod. He stood up and gave a deep bow and wave of his arm. "My name is Joshua, and it is wonderful to finally meet all of you. I am in your debt."

They all stared at him dumbly.

"Do you have a last name?" asked Scott.

"A second name?" said the old man. "I did once. A long time ago. Siward, if I remember correctly."

"Seems like something you shouldn't forget," commented Deacon.

"Yes, but I have had other things on my mind for a very long time, and my mind and body

aren't entirely here with you. Regardless, Joshua will do just fine."

"Okay, then…Old Man," rasped Paul. "Is there some kind of story you would like to tell us?"

"A story?" asked the man. "I have many stories I could tell. I'm sure you also have many I would enjoy hearing, but I have been…awake...for almost three days now. I have crossed many leagues and been through a great deal to find you, and warn you. To be honest, I am already troubled that you are not entirely as I expected…but I am…beyond weary. I would like nothing more than some sleep. I will do my best to answer all your questions when I have a clear mind. Without rest I don't know how much longer…I can hold on…."

Paul was going to ask the man to explain further but Jen spoke before him. "Of course, we can offer you a nice bed and clean sheets."

The girls made Joshua a bed on one of the large couches, forcing Scott to sleep on the floor. When it was ready the man staggered onto the couch and quickly fell asleep. Even Paul could see from the man's body language and puffy red eyes he was exhausted. Perhaps he was not quite as old as he looked; it may have been the travel and lack of sleep on his face. His age was difficult to discern, regardless. He slept with his blade wrapped up in the cloak that sat bundled on the floor, with his back exposed. Clearly, he felt he was in no danger from them.

"What do you guys make of him?" asked Wes softly, who waited a while to be sure the man was asleep before speaking. They sat beside the large fire listening to the old man snore and the fire crackle.

"I think that he's crazy. That simple," muttered Deacon. He was slowly drinking the rest of one of the sodas that half exploded from the scream, savoring every drop.

"I don't know about that. He seems sincere enough," said Anna. "I didn't sense anything about the man that said he was lying or crazy. Some of things he said sound real enough to me."

"He's hinting that he's from across the portals, right?" said Wes. "And it's weird how he keeps looking and acting like he knows us somehow. He looks human to me, but I remember hearing rumors

there are creatures out there that looked like humans but aren't. We should be careful."

"Geez, I never even thought of that," admitted Scott.

"C'mon, those rumors are just a load," said Deacon. "He's a regular old man who's off his gourd."

"See how he's dressed, though," said Liv, whispering so quietly they barely heard her.

"Jesus, Liv, if that snoring isn't going to wake him up I don't think a gunshot will," said Paul.

"Okay, sorry," said Liv who spoke just a little louder this time. "I said look at his clothes. I know you guys were never fashion conscious but all of them are hand made. Well made, too. And weird. No tags or anything."

"Yeah, I suppose that's true," said Wes. "And his knife's pretty intricate too. I guess it seems like a lot of effort for some kind of trick."

"He reminds me of what God might look like, you know, if he came down to check the place out," commented Scott.

"What do you mean? God would be bigger, and older, and…well…cleaner," said Jen coldly.

"You're all missing the most important point," interrupted Anna. "He told Paul to *make* the Giant Black appear. He basically saved all of our lives as much as we saved his. How would some crazy old man know that? A lucky guess? I don't think so. There's a lot more to that man than what we see."

They were all quiet as they considered what she said.

"This is too much," said Paul, whose raspy voice occasionally squeaked as he spoke. "Everything is so messed up. There is no convention, or sanity, in the world for us to stand on anymore. I think it's time we stopped looking for rational explanations for the things happening to us and try to deal with them. I somehow made a Giant Black appear and scream out of the mist to save us from a group of deadly creatures. It's ridiculous."

"Well, ridiculous or not, it happened," said Deacon who was as confused as any of them. "He's

got some answers for us, but we'll have to wait for them until the morning. I, for one, can wait. I don't know if I want to hear the truth anyway. Paul, wake me for my shift tonight; if you keep letting me skip my guard duty you're gonna find me falling asleep when you need me, and whoever's on guard keep an eye on that old nut. The last thing I need is that dagger in my back. Goodnight."

Deacon got up and went to bed without another word. The rest of them soon followed.

* * *

Paul sat alone in front of the fire with the rifle in his hands. He admired the gun's angles and shape in the glow of the orange flames. *Three bullets, and that's all she wrote.* The bullets were not what dogged his mind. How did he make the beast appear? And how did he make that scream? Of all of them, why was he the one with this ability? It should have been Wes, maybe Deacon, but not him. He didn't believe in these things, in ghosts or illusions, in magic, monsters, strange old men, or portals, but they kept getting stuffed down his throat.

Joshua Siward was not the only one who snored. Deacon's snorts were just as loud and even Liv was breathing heavily tonight. The cold night air sank into the lobby of the Sunwapta Falls Resort and Paul was happy they found bedding as the nights were getting very cold. Paul noticed earlier in the day some of the birch leaves already beginning to change color. After his bath, and after a few days of peace and quiet, he'd begun to think maybe this place would be a safe haven for them. He began to think it was far enough off the beaten path; that it was hidden and safe. They had all the wood they would need to keep the place warm for the winter, and there was a fresh supply of water and wildlife. The place had proven itself to be sturdy and warm. He'd almost convinced himself again that staying in one place might be the answer. He had promised himself never again, but the promise, like the times he'd made it before, was forgotten with comfort and security. When was he going to learn?

Paul was torn from his thoughts as the old man began to talk and toss in his sleep. Paul looked

at his body on the couch and could see him swatting his arm at the air and moaning lightly. Suddenly, after a moment of silence, the old man sat straight up and shouted loudly, "Gone! Oh, Vitalia!"

Paul jumped up and came over to him. He looked up at Paul, confused and still half asleep.

"Who are you? Where am I!" asked the man.

His gasp and questions roused the rest of the group from their sleep, except Scott, who didn't move.

"I'm a friend, and you're safe," said Paul who used a soothing tone that still came out raspy.

Paul's voice brought the man out of his sleep and he rubbed his watery eyes. "Right. Thank you. I am sorry about that…it has been some time since I slept. I suppose my dreams are catching up with me."

Deacon rolled over and went back to sleep when he realized it was only a nightmare. After being with Anna for the last six months, waking up to a sudden scream was pretty standard fare. The rest of them followed suit. In the end only Paul even remembered it happened the next day.

"No problem, *old man*," said Paul, who used the title with affection. "We've seen enough to give us nightmares for a lifetime."

Joshua smiled and nodded at Paul and turned over in his bed and quickly fell back asleep.

* * *

In the morning Paul awoke to find he'd fallen asleep on his guard duty, and that the old man was gone. Paul rubbed his eyes and walked over to the couch where he should have been. There was nothing but a blanket draped over the cushions. The front door remained locked on the inside.

* * *

It was a nice morning outside, the kind of fall day that was perfect for a walk in the woods or

for one final picnic before the days became too cold. Inside the Sunwapta Falls Resort lobby seven young people spent a morning of quiet contemplation, as they did their best to clean up the mess from the previous night's attack.

"Where do you think he went?" asked Liv. They had already walked throughout the resort looking and calling for the man, but found nothing but three toed Creeper tracks in the dirt.

"He wasn't real," answered Wes.

"Oh, yes, he was," said Scott firmly. "I saw that knife of his lop off fingers, here's one right here!" Scott picked up a long black digit and pointed it at them before tossing it out the window.

"But how did he get out of here and lock the door behind himself? It's impossible. Did he jump up twenty five feet and hop out of the skylight? Or did he manage to squeeze himself out of a four inch window?" asked Wes.

"I felt the force of him pushing against the door," said Deacon. "And I don't usually see the stuff that isn't there, even when the mist is thick. He was real."

"You heard voices when we were out in the mist looking for Scott, and that wasn't the only time. The mist doesn't seem to affect you nearly as much, but it still affects you," said Paul. "And don't forget the old man had a nightmare last night. He screamed out some name. Vitamin or something. Ghosts don't usually have nightmares, do they?"

"I never said he was a *ghost*, I said he wasn't *real*," said Wes.

"Maybe he's out for a walk. Not real! That's ridiculous," said Liv who was chilled by the thought the old man might not have been what he seemed.

"He was only a vision," said Anna knowingly. "I don't know from where, or from...who, but regardless, he saved our lives."

"This is ridiculous, you guys! Visions don't carry knives and cut off hands. He was real. I'll swear on it," said Scott vehemently.

"Can you remember what he looked like?" asked Anna. They all tried, and most of them came

up with some kind of image, but it was unfinished and vague.

"Well, maybe he'll be back," said Wes. "I guess we'll have to play it by ear. It *was* pretty hazy last night, Scott. You know what the mist can do."

"If *he* wasn't real, than none of you is, either," said Scott, who marched off in a huff.

"I guess if he comes back than we'll know the truth. So much for the answers we were hoping for, eh?" said Paul. "It's funny, the mist was pretty thick last night. We breathed it in, yet I don't feel too bad today."

"Yeah, me neither," answered Liv. "Maybe we're getting used to it."

The seven of them spent the day doing small chores and hanging around the camp. They did their best to avoid one another, especially Paul. There were some underlying disagreements regarding the old man that none of them wanted to discuss, but for the most part, they were avoiding talk of leaving. Deacon's feet were much better, and Paul walked with only a small limp now, and sometimes with no limp at all until he stepped too hard. Procrastination to leave would end quickly when Paul was ready, and they knew that time was not far off.

Deacon spent the morning playing cribbage with Scott but was forced to quit when Jen insisted he gather more firewood. She intended on having another bath after complaining that hers was cold because of Wes's extended soak. Deacon didn't mind, he'd been on the verge of losing another can of Coke to Scott, and he took the interruption as an excuse to quit the game without having to hand it over. Deacon suspected as he walked through the pines gathering an armful of wood that Scott was likely already drinking the Coke back at the camp and laughing to himself.

* * *

Liv knew Jen was going to have another hot bath, and Liv would have liked one too, but *she* didn't have a big strong man willing to bring up water and wood for her. Scott and Wes would have

laughed at her if she even asked them to help, and Deacon was already taken. Well, maybe if she asked nicely and batted her eyes a bit they would help but she wasn't that desperate. But even if she had asked Deacon to help her too, Jen would probably just get all huffy and jealous. Paul was busy searching the cabins again, and likely also looking for the missing old man, or evidence of his presence. So that left her with the choice of hauling the wood and water for herself, which she didn't have any desire to do, or bathing in the river. The water was frigid, but refreshing, and it was a warm sunny day.

* * *

Deacon's breath stopped when he saw Liv standing naked and alone on the large rock, gathering the courage to jump into the small pool at the base of the waterfall. The shape and curves of her body always made his heart run fast and his skin prickle. He'd seen her naked before, on numerous occasions, but he had never before been alone when he saw her. It had never been like this. Usually he got nothing more than a quick glance because Jen was somewhere nearby, and if she wasn't, one of the guys was around to make comments and ogle with their tongues out. She was also never this open with it. She stood there in the sun, swaying in the breeze as comfortable with her nakedness as a child. Deacon took her in.

* * *

Liv almost dove for her towel when she saw the man's shape in the trees from the corner of her eye. Her first thought was that it was Joshua Siward, getting kicks from watching her undress, or perhaps one of the guys spying, but she quickly realized that it was not just one of the guys, it was Deacon. She could tell by the way he moved and the size of his frame. He was alone and had not yet

seen her. She reached down for her towel but her hand stopped, and instead proceeded to slowly remove her tattered bra. She stood there, naked in the sun, knowing he was watching her. Her heart pounded with the excitement of possibility.

* * *

She knows I'm watching, realized Deacon as he stared through the pine trees at her swaying body. His heart beat even harder and butterflies exploded in his stomach. He was hypnotized. She was like a siren calling him without a sound, and he had to fight the desire to drop the wood, walk out to the riverbed and take her into his arms. It was a scenario he'd imagined before. But he couldn't, could he? He was tied to Jen, a knot that he couldn't undo. He awoke from his stupor when she suddenly jumped into the small pool of water below.

* * *

Jesus, Liv. He's going to realize that you know he's watching if you stand here and wiggle your ass at him much longer. Liv felt herself dive into the deep cold pool. Diving was a far stretch from slowly wading into the cold river, inch by inch, as she had originally intended to do. It was as if some part of her wanted to look strong and confident in front of Deacon's gaze, and she paid for it. When she came up for air her lungs were in shock. When she gathered her composure Liv quickly washed her body and hair with the resort's soaps as the frigid water sucked the warmth from her flesh. It wasn't long until she shook from both cold and excitement. When finished, she struggled out of the water and back up onto the rock as fast as she could, now with little care for how she looked doing it. She was frozen. She found Deacon there, as she expected she would, holding the towel for her.

* * *

This is the stupidest thing you've ever done, thought Deacon, as he dropped the pile of sappy wood and walked up onto the rock. It was as if he didn't have a choice but to do it, something in him, buried beneath the part of his brain that told him this was a huge mistake, made him take those steps. *What if Jen sees me here with this towel and Liv naked?* What would she do? How could the seven of them stay together if she saw? His brain again tried to talk him out of it, but it was too late. Deacon had already gone down a path he could not turn back from and he stood there, waiting for her to come out of the water with her towel in his hands. He was gambling, but he didn't care. The payoff could be worth it.

It had been building for over a year. It was something they shared that only two people interested in each other could really understand. Shared looks that were held just a moment too long. Standing as close as possible at every opportunity. Kindness and generosity when it was uncalled for or over the top. It was harmless hidden flirting in the beginning, but it was growing daily, and getting more and more difficult to keep at bay.

* * *

The butterflies returned when she saw Deacon standing there with her towel. He stood tall with the sunlight glinting in eyes that looked both terrified and hopeful at the same time. Liv took the towel from his hands and did her best to not appear startled or shamed by his presence, or by her own nakedness. She noticed his big hands were shaking as badly as her own. Liv slowly wrapped the towel around herself and gazed into his eyes. He returned the gaze. His hand moved up to touch her cheek as she moved her own to his chest and lifted herself up on her tippy-toes to meet his lips. They only kissed for an instant, as their moment was interrupted by the blast of Paul's rifle.

* * *

Scott fumbled and then dropped the Coke in his hand at the sound of the blast, spilling it all over the deck of cards and cribbage board.

"Ahh crap!" muttered Scott as he jumped to follow Wes out of the front door of the building toward the sound. Wes had the presence of mind to grab Deacon's axe. Scott was angry with himself for not thinking to grab some kind of weapon, but it was already too late to stop and turn around when he realized he was empty handed. Together they ran toward the sound through the rows of cabins and pine trees. The echo of the blast still resonated through the waterfall canyon surrounding them as they pushed the muscles in their legs. They both wiped cobwebs from their faces as they ran between the trees and tight spaces between the cabins. Scott struggled to keep up with Wes, who, even encumbered by the axe, was still the faster of the two.

"It's gotta be serious," panted Scott from behind as he pumped his legs after Wes. Cabins and pine trees flew by. "Paul's been talking nonstop about those bullets for the last few days! He wouldn't waste one."

"I know," said Wes from in front of him. "Jesus, where's Deacon?"

Scott had no idea and struggled too hard for breath to reply.

They came to a cabin at the far end of the resort with the front door wide open.

"Paul!" yelled Wes into the open door as he stopped ahead of Scott. Only the sound of a commotion replied from inside. Scott, who did not stop to even look inside, charged in through the open door. Wes followed right behind.

Paul lay on a bed covered in blood with one of his hands clasped around the wrist of a Creeper and the other around its neck. Black saliva dripped from the creatures open mouth onto Paul's face as he struggled, with eyes tightly closed, to keep the creature's teeth from sinking into his face.

"Can't hold it!" croaked Paul.

Scott jumped with all the might and force his body could muster, right onto the Creeper, and tackled it into the corner of the room. End tables and lamps broke beneath the force of the assault. The creature let out what almost sounded like a curse as it smashed into the floor. Paul rolled over on the bed and struggled to wipe the fluid from his eyes. The Creeper did not have the size or weight of Scott but it was fervent with its sinewy muscles and desperate with its strength, and Scott soon found himself in much the same situation as Paul, struggling with all his might to keep the thing's teeth from sinking into his own shoulder. Wes came to Scott's aid, quickly driving the pick end of the axe into the creature's side. Wes screamed as he drove his thrust home, allowing Scott to push the beast's face up from his own. It let out a roar and ripped the axe from its side with its free hand and tossed it to the floor. The creature bellowed in anger and launched itself off of Scott and onto Wes, fiercely biting into his arm and knocking him to the ground. Wes struggled, screaming in agony with the creature on top of him.

"Paul, shoot it!" hollared Scott, struggling to get up from the corner.

Paul did not shoot, instead using the butt of the rifle as a club and smashing it into the back of the creature's head with a sickening thud. It rolled off of Wes and fell lifelessly to the floor and seemed to shrink up like a frightened insect. Lucky, who appeared from nowhere, now barked furiously at the creature's unmoving shape.

Scott picked up the axe and helped Wes to his feet. Wes was already wobbly from the blood loss, and Scott clutched his arm in a struggle to help him keep the blood in.

"How serious is it, Scott?" asked Paul who pointed the rifle at the black shape on the floor.

"He's cut bad, man. Most blood I've seen in a while. And you?"

"I'll live," said Paul.

The shape on the floor gave a jerk. The black four fingered hand grasped at the air above it.

"Jesus, Paul, finish it! It's not dead," said Scott.

Paul looked at the creature as it began to awake. Its grey eyeballs rolled in behind its transparent lids and the creature tried to get to its feet. A black liquid poured from the hole Wes punctured in its side.

Paul did not shoot. *Only two more now, they can't be wasted*, thought Paul, *not even on this piece of shit.* He would enjoy bashing the thing's brains in with the blunt end of the rifle anyway.

The beast struggled and finally came to its feet and looked at them. It wobbled, and threatened to fall over. A smile came to its lips, showing lines of yellow teeth like broken glass, stained pink with Wes's blood. It suddenly, and surprisingly, spoke with a voice so guttural it was difficult to decipher. "*We...know...now. Who you are. We've found the Apostles. It's...only...time. His darkness shall rein on this world. We will eat your hearts and swallow your—*"

The creature was not allowed to finish. One bullet passed through its chest, and another through its head.

Chapter 21 – From Manslaughter to First Degree

Wesley David – Entry #21

"I see skies of blue and clouds of white."

It's damn beautiful country out here. All I see are huge mountains with peaks blanketed in snow and small waterfalls trickling down pine covered slopes. Small lakes of emerald, turquoise, and navy line the sides of the highway. The birds are chirping, and the sun is shining down on the back of my neck. I keep thinking of that Louie Armstrong song, "What a Wonderful World" and giggle to myself. I think Paul's worried that I'm starting to lose it.

"I see friends shaking hands saying, 'How do you do?'"

It's been a few days since my last entry. We have since left the Sunwapta Falls Resort to the ravages of time. While there, we managed to fight off an attack of over a hundred or so Creepers and came through with little more than a few cuts and bruises, but it only took one nasty little son of a bitch that hid out in one of the cabins to bite off a piece of my left tricep. It's lucky the resort was classy enough to provide travelers with those little sewing kits, or I might not be here right now. Anna sewed up the wound skillfully. She took a year or two of nursing before The Arrival. Anyway, thank goodness it was my left arm, or I would not be able to write these entries.

"They're really saying 'I love you!'"

I cried. I'm not proud of it, but I did. It felt good, too. Anna said that in all it was over sixty stitches on my arm when she was done. Only seventeen stitches for Paul, mostly on his hands and shoulder. There was no anesthetic, no booze, nothing but a cloth in my mouth and tears streaming down my face. Paul didn't shed a tear. He didn't even grimace; it was almost like he enjoyed the pain. Like he was feeding off of it. (And they think I'm losing it?) I'm keeping the wound clean, almost to the point of annoying my companions, stopping at every little stream and waterfall to clean and redress it

as we walk. Thank God I've got no shortage of bandages cut from the bedding we looted. I'll be damned if gangrene is gonna take off my arm after I took sixty stitches sewn by a nursing school forced dropout with a bad attitude.

This is the promise I made to myself.

"And I think to myself, 'What a wonderful world.'"

* * *

Deacon seems funny, thought Jen as they walked. *He's been quiet the last few days since Wes and Paul were hurt. He puts too much pressure on himself; he's probably kicking himself because he wasn't there for them when they were attacked. The man thinks he can be everywhere for everyone, every time. Maybe he's mad at me for making him collect wood for my bath. That was pretty selfish, I suppose. How was I to know they would be attacked?*

Jen gave Deacon an angry stare that caused an alarm to erupt in his head. Her anger quickly gave way to a smile that showed she was only joking, and he realized she suspected nothing. Deacon had travelled in agony before, with feet so blistered his shoes were wet with puss, with a sprained ankle, with aches, bruises and cuts, but this guilt was hardest of all. It was like he was once again carrying Jessica Grainger on his back.

"Deacon, are you listening to me?" asked Scott.

"Yeah yeah, a bag of sour cream for a can of root beer, I got it," replied Deacon who was startled from his thoughts. He realized he had not, in fact, been paying any attention to Scott.

"Well, are ya interested? I got some signs that Anna may be willing to cough up a Snickers bar for those chips, you know. I am king of the sour cream. No one else has any left except me. I am your cream connection, Deek."

"Gross!" said Wes with a laugh from behind them.

Deacon laughed too, for the first time in a while. "Jesus, Scott!" said Deacon, who handed him a pop can from the heavy collection he carried strewn over his back in a doubled up pillowcase. "You can have this for free, if you stop talking like that." Deacon was happy to just relieve some of the weight.

"Sweet! Thanks. Forget trading, from now on I'll pepper you with ambiguously gay comments and get as much pop as I want," said Scott.

"Be careful he doesn't take you up on that," said Liv, looking at Deacon and smiling. It was the first thing she said to him since the waterfall.

"I don't think Jen would like that too much, now would ya, Jen?" smirked Scott.

"I don't think I have too much to worry about," replied Jen, who put her arm around Deacon and gave him a squeeze.

* * *

They travelled at a slow pace over the last three days, allowing both Paul and Wes to clean and dress their injuries as much as possible. The cuts were healing well, but Wes was taking the cleaning too far, prompting Anna to tell him that you could actually over clean a wound.

When they left the Sunwapta Resort they were loaded down like robbers. Clean bags and pillowcases were loaded with everything they could find. The hotel provided them with a good base of supplies. They wore the bedding as jackets or capes, and it worked well for the most part, keeping the cold autumn breeze off of their backs, but they looked ridiculous. Each of them again carried a sharp kitchen knife from the pantries of the cabins with kitchenettes. In a back shed they located even more useful items, including a large axe that Paul carried, which was far more useful for cutting wood than as a weapon. Scott joked that he looked like Jack Nicholson from *The Shining* when he carried it, to which Paul happily replied with madness in his eyes, "Heeeeerrrreee'sss Johnny!"

They crossed into Banff, the more southern of the two mountain parks, and it proved to be as rugged and beautiful as Jasper.

* * *

"Is that a tank?" asked Liv suddenly, who stopped with Paul to look into the distance at an approaching convoy.

"Oh, man. It's definitely some kind of military vehicle," replied Paul, "but I don't think it's a tank. It looks like some kind of a troop carrier."

"Should we get off the road?" asked Deacon. The military proved itself to be less than trustworthy over the last year and a half, and many of them didn't want to take a chance. Anna was close to panic at the sight of the approaching vehicles.

"It's not like we're a threat. An axe doesn't pose a threat to a machine gun. And we don't have much for them to steal," answered Paul.

"What about our chips, Paul?" asked Scott, terrified at the thought of losing his snacks.

"I don't think we have much to worry about," replied Paul, somewhat amused with Scott's desire to protect his potato chips.

They stopped at the side of the road and waited for the vehicles to come to them. The convoy moved slowly, presumably to preserve fuel, much as they had done in the Lincoln. Paul waved to the trucks as they approached and the lead vehicle, an eight wheeled armored transport, came to a stop beside him. A hatch opened above and a middle aged man with a large mustache and beret emerged in uniform with a pistol in hand. A few other soldiers climbed out as well and he signaled to the rest of the convoy to stop for a break. Men in uniforms emerged from all of the vehicles behind him to urinate at the side of the highway.

"My, my, here's a ragtag bunch if I ever saw one!" said the man, who took a long swig from a green canteen and spit it out in front of the group. It wasn't spit directly at them, but it was a veiled

threat and enough to show who was in charge. "I'm sure you've heard this one before, but I'll say it anyway…as a member of the North American resistance, the Canadian government has empowered me with the authority to collect all and any arms that may aid in the defense and protection of all Canadian territory as based in article seven of the Parliamentary blah, blah, blah. So please hand over all and any weapons or ammunition you may be carrying."

"And exactly how do you expect us to defend ourselves?" asked Paul.

"Hmmm. I suppose that defense is *our* job, young man."

"And a mighty fine job you've done thus far," responded Paul.

The man snorted and sat down on the vehicle with his black boots hanging off the side. "Well, lucky enough for you, you don't look like you've got much we need, or want anyway. Are those bed sheets yer wearin'?"

"Yeah, we've seen some tough times," responded Paul.

"No worries, lad, it's been going around lately. I'm just glad you're not one of that Isack's bunch. Last thing I want to deal with today are those assholes."

"They're around. We came across a bunch of them about a week ago. You can probably still see how our meeting went from my eye," said Paul.

"I had you spotted long before you saw us. If you were one of them I figured you would have made a run for the woods. Not too many people stick around when we approach these days," the man sighed and continued."I'm Sergeant First-Class Adam Walbeck. We've got a ten minute stop here. I would appreciate a few hints of what's down the road if you wouldn't mind. I might be able to pretend I never saw that rifle of yours if you're helpful."

"I don't have any bullets left for it now. It's basically a show piece. If I did, we probably would have run for the forest ourselves," responded Paul. "This is all we have now." Paul held up a knife for the man and Deacon lifted up his axe.

The man snorted again. "You aren't going to get too far with those, lads, not too far at all."

Wes, listening from the background, couldn't help but come forward and join into the conversation. "What's the news out there? Are you getting control back? Have the portals slowed down?"

The man sighed again. "Are we getting control back? No, not yet. There's nowhere that's safe and clear as far as I know, and I've been *around* in the last year and a half. The American contingents that were helping in the province have returned home, why, I don't know, the borders have basically disappeared anyway. They've got some satellite shots of portals and heavy activity in these mountains, but they're usually gone by the time we can find them and try to plug 'em up. Have they slowed down? Not so far as *I* can tell. Maybe fewer vermin are spewing out now than when it first began, but it has definitely not stopped."

"Have you heard if anywhere has got it together yet? Is anywhere safe?" asked Wes, still desperate for news and answers.

"No, lad. Not really. I hear Utah—maybe—but the cure might be worse than the disease. We recently came out of Calgary and I don't recommend you head there. The food's run out now for the most part, and it's every man and beast for themselves. It's a place you don't want to be. The cities and towns are crawling with 'em."

"What about Banff?" asked Paul.

"C'mon, now, lads, shouldn't I be asking the questions here?" said the man, half laughing to himself. He seemed very tired. "Banff isn't too bad. If you're real desperate you might want to stop by the Banff Springs Hotel. There's a big group there. We don't give them too bad of a time and in return they give us meat. They've got lots of good hunting in these parts. At least for a while. Anyway, I've got five minutes. Tell me your story."

They did. They embellished somewhat, and edited out Jessica Grainger and Joshua Siward, but the man listened to them, at times his eyes opened wide, and occasionally a smile came to his face. The tale went on well beyond five minutes but he did not interrupt them once. Many of the soldiers lay

out in the sun on the long grass at the side of the highway. They also didn't seem to mind the story going long.

"A Giant Black, eh?" asked the man with a smirk when they were finally finished. He sounded dubious.

"Yes, sir," responded Paul, and the six of them all nodded their heads in agreement behind him.

"That story's good enough for a fisherman," said the man, snorting to himself again. "How far off the highway is that Sunwapta Resort? It might make a good place for us to settle down for the night, if there's any bedding left. I've got maps here—I want an exact location of that tunnel. You'll pass through one not far from here, but it's clear."

Paul and Deacon did the best they could for the man, pointing out every location and bit of detail they could remember on the map he provided. He listed to them quietly and took in all of the advice and information they offered.

"Right. I appreciate the help, boys. One final question. Where'd he get that?" the Sergeant pointed at the freshly opened can of root beer in Scott's hand.

Scott made a move to try and hide it behind his back, but realized he was already caught, and looked over at Paul and Deacon with red cheeks. He stood there frozen in a shrug.

"We got it at the resort. We found a nearly empty pop machine there." answered Paul.

"Nearly empty, huh?" said the man with one raised eyebrow. "That pillowcase back there doesn't look *nearly empty* to me."

Paul swallowed hard and looked over to Deacon who muttered a curse under his breath.

"Does article seven say anything about the confiscation of soft drinks?" asked Paul.

The man snorted again and this time he let out a gruff laugh as well.

"I'll tell ya what. If there's one thing I definitely believe about yer stories, it's that you've seen some tough times lately. The bed sheets are probably the biggest giveaway. I've got forty one men

with me, and we've been drinking water and Tang for the last two months. I may be able to let go of a couple of confiscated weapons in exchange for a cold soda for each of my men. Not a bad deal, seeing as how you've only got a butterknife and a tomahawk to defend yourselves."

Paul smiled. "You, sir, have got a deal."

When they counted out the pop it turned out they were short by ten cans, but each of them threw in some of their own treats to make up the difference. Even Scott didn't complain. Sergeant First-Class Adam Walbeck was a hero to his men as he tossed them cans of pop and chocolate bars. Soldiers ran from the back to get in on the action and a series of trades and offers began among the men, much as it had with the group.

When Paul saw the size of the weapons stash, he was thankful they did not have loaded weapons with them, because they would have been taken away. Piles of rifles and pistols and boxes of ammunition took up half of a large transport truck. Paul and Deacon hopped into the back of it behind the sergeant.

Walbeck handed a guard in the back of the truck a can of Coke. "Take a hike, Crawley. I got some business back here."

"Yessir," said the soldier, who cracked his can with a greedy smile and hopped out of the back to join the rest of the soldiers.

"Alright. First thing, I'm not supposed to be doing this. Keep in mind I have made many enemies and pissed off a lot of people to get this stuff, understand?"

"Yessir," replied Deacon and Paul in unison.

"If you're stopped by another military brigade, you do not tell them where you got this. Understand?"

"Yessir."

"You do not mention my name, and you will hand these weapons back over to them if they so request. Understand?"

"Yessir!"

"Alright, what do we got here?" mumbled the man to himself as he viewed the weaponry. In total he gave them three. The first was a nice hunting rifle he exchanged with Paul for his older one. It had a large scope mounted to it and a large square magazine. He gave Deacon a rifle as well, this one without a scope, but he explained that the rifles took the same type of ammunition, and that could prove useful. Each gun came with two full boxes of shells and a full magazine in each. He also gave them a pump action shotgun, along with a full box of shells. He carefully, and deliberately, explained each part of the weapons, how to clean them and how to load them, along with a long speech about how weapons should be respected. He was very knowledgeable. Paul and Deacon could not help but grin stupidly as the Sergeant spoke.

"I can tell by your faces you're satisfied. It might even be enough firepower for you take down another Giant Black! But that would all be in a days work for *you* boys, though, eh?" the man snorted, and laughed to himself again.

"I can't tell you how much we appreciate this," said Deacon, who ignored the sergeant's joke and admired the smooth black shotgun in his hands.

"When we confiscate these weapons we never leave people completely defenseless. We always leave 'em with at least one. I've spared some ammunition to the more unfortunate people we've come across, because everyone's fighting this battle now. The way I see it, you're soldiers too. If you can put a bullet through the head of one Skull, or one Creeper, than giving this stuff up will be well worth it."

"I can promise you we'll put them to good use," said Paul.

"That's one I can believe, lad," replied the man.

"Could I ask you for one more thing, sir?" asked Deacon.

The Sergeant looked at him somewhat perturbed, sensing Deacon was not satisfied with what he'd already provided.

"I noticed that box of smokes in your pocket. What'll it take to get one?"

The Sergeant smiled and popped one out of the box and handed it over to Deacon.

They made their way out of the truck and shook hands with the Sergeant. His grip was too firm, and Deacon looked at Paul and shook his hand in pain after the sergeant's back was turned. A couple of the soldiers noticed and laughed. Walbeck called for the men to load up, and the engines of the big transports fired up loudly as the soldiers climbed back into their vehicles without a hint of complaint.

"Alright, you kids take it easy now. If I find half of a burnt car in that tunnel, then I'll believe your Giant Black story," said the Sergeant.

"Thank you for the help, sir," said Paul. "And believe us or not, you look out for yourself in that tunnel."

"You look out too, lads. You look out too….And one quick piece of advice: I know it'll sound a little weird. But…well, I've been having some dreams and…don't let fear make your decisions for you, and most of all…don't be afraid to travel to the world beyond. Your future, maybe all of our futures, lie there." The sergeant gave them a quick salute and jogged to the front of the convoy.

The rest of the group joined them for the goodbye, and all seven of them stared dumbly as the vehicles drove away. They watched until the green trucks were far off into the distance and all was again quiet, save for a distant hum of the engines and the chirping of birds and squirrels.

"Are you guys starting to see a recurring theme here?" asked Wes.

Chapter 22 – D.U.I.

Wesley David - Entry # 22

It's pretty simple, really. Monsters.

When you get to the bottom of this whole situation—it's all about monsters. And I'm not talking about the kind from "Where the Wild Things Are."

For me, they used to be predators. I used to think these creatures that hunt us, that kill us and eat us, that burn our homes and destroy our lives were just animals. A little smarter than your standard raccoon or chipmunk maybe, but animals none the less. They need food - we are food, so it's survival of the fittest. Simple grade 9 biology. But that Creeper spoke to us, well, gurgled to us anyway, and now my thoughts have changed. They're monsters now. They have motive. It's all gone from manslaughter to first degree.

Exactly what that motive is, is still a mystery to me, to all of us. It said that it had found us. Us as in us. Meaning Paul, Scott, Deacon, Liv, Anna, Jen, and yours truly. Like we're some kind of target. Like maybe we're what they're looking for. What they came here for. Like we're special in some way.

I know it's a ridiculous idea—to think they are here for the seven of us. It's like thinking that the entire world revolves around you. Regular "Truman Show" material. A classic God complex. Am I that presumptuous and conceited? But here we are. The Creeper told us so. Joshua told us so. Is it a coincidence? Are we losing our minds? Are we extraordinary in some way? Is any of this really happening?

* * *

"Paul, you look like the Cheshire cat," said Scott.

Paul didn't even look up from admiring his new rifle to respond, but it was true, he couldn't

wipe the smile from his face.

"I love this gun. I feel like…like things are starting to go our way again."

They had stopped for a break on the shore of a sandy turquoise lake after marching hard for three hours. As they relaxed in the warm sand, Deacon and Wes took turns re-heating the final goat leftovers and passing them around.

"I don't think we need to be afraid to eat the rest of the goat. I'll bag us something tasty soon," said Paul.

"Will it come with fries?" asked Liv. Scott chuckled.

Liv was in good spirits too. They all were. The guns gave them a sense of safety. They no longer felt defenseless as they travelled or relaxed. If any creatures, bandits, or religious zealots decided to attack them now, they would have to face bullets, instead of just fists.

"So, what's the plan, guys?" asked Paul.

"The plan? I thought we decided on the coast," answered Wes, ruffling Lucky's ears.

"Yeah, yeah, I know that, I mean for the next little while. Should we check out the Banff Springs Hotel like the Sergeant said?"

"Why not? I would like to spend some time in a five star hotel. Sounds like the break we've been looking for," said Liv, staring at Deacon as he stood shirtless in the sun after washing his green t-shirt in the lake. Jen didn't seem to notice.

"How far away is Banff from here, anyway?" asked Jen as she rubbed her aching feet.

"The convoy was only two days out of the town site, they were going slow so I suppose three, maybe four days' hike if we keep a good pace," answered Deacon.

There was a small moan from the group. They'd only been back on the road for a couple of days, yet it already felt like an eternity.

"What I wouldn't give for some bikes. We could ride there in a day, easy," muttered Scott.

"If we come across seven top grade, mechanically sound mountain bikes I'll be sure to let you

know, Scott," said Paul. "Maybe a bicycle convoy will drive by and we can trade some bed sheets for them. Hell, you could peddle off some of those potato chips, too."

"Alright!" said Scott. "I get it. No bikes."

"Sorry, bud, I don't mean to be an asshole—" started Paul.

"It just comes naturally," interrupted Jen.

Paul looked at her coolly and continued. "Like I was saying, we have to quit all this whining and complaining. Yes, I know life is all screwed up, and this sucks, and that sucks, but complaining is not doing anything for us. We need to toughen up, get lean and mean again like we did after we lost Ryan."

"Yeah…we were getting pretty bad-ass out there in the woods, weren't we?" smiled Wes.

"Yes, Wesley, we were. We were a well oiled machine, my friend. We've had it good lately. The pop and chips, the car, the hotel, the Twinkies, the guns…you name it. Our luck can't keep up. And when you consider it, we don't have too much to complain about. Life could be a lot worse. We could be Creeper food."

"I guess we are one tiny little level above that," said Scott.

"I'm trying to say that if we go to this hotel and there's a bunch of people there we have to promise ourselves that we won't get too comfortable again. Every time we stop, or even slow down too much, all hell breaks loose. We agreed to go to the coast. And I don't know about you guys, but I intend to make it. Are you with me?"

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Good. 'Cause I'm with you too."

* * *

The day stayed warm and sunny for the most part, with only the occasional cloud and light

breeze. It was not until later that night they could again feel the fall approaching. They walked together in the middle of the highway with the afternoon sun high above them, centered by towering mountains. Deacon, Paul, and Scott carried the guns tied across their backs.

Anna suddenly looked up and sniffed at the air. "Someone's coming."

"From where?" asked Paul, looking in both directions down the totally empty highway. There was nothing for kilometers in each direction.

"Are you sure, Anna?" asked Jen. "Did you hear it?"

"No, not exactly, but it's coming from behind us. Headed this way…quickly. Maybe a little too quickly," said Anna, almost talking to herself.

"I can't say I like the sound of that," muttered Scott.

"Should we get off the road?" asked Deacon as he readied his weapon. No one answered him, or made to move.

"I can hear an engine!" said Liv who was listening intently with her eyes closed.

Paul peered down the road again but still did not hear or see anything. There was only a dull mist in the air, making him believe it likely wasn't some kind of illusion.

"Let's step to the side and see if it passes us by," said Paul. "Maybe the convoy is coming back already." He moved to the shoulder of the road and placed his heavy pillowcase full of gear down. They all followed his lead and waited there for whatever it was that approached. When a pickup truck finally came into view, they were all impressed by Anna's ability to sense it coming. Judging by the truck's speed, it must have been at least ten kilometers back when she first spoke.

"Wow, they're going fast!" said Deacon. "I guess wasting gas isn't a very big concern for them."

"They're definitely in for an ugly ticket if they hit a speed trap," said Scott.

The truck was an ancient blue Ford with so many dents and scratches that it looked ready for the scrap heap. The truck did not slow down at all as it approached and Paul believed it would pass

through when it suddenly came to a screeching stop beside them. Smoke wafted from the squealing tires and thin tendrils wisped up around them. From inside the truck they could hear music playing, what sounded like Guns 'N Roses. The sound blasted out even louder as the driver's side window came down. Inside was a young man with a cowboy hat and a smile. Paul was the first to walk up to the window and was immediately hit by the strong smell of booze. The young man inside spoke first, but Paul motioned to his ear that he couldn't hear what he was saying over the music. The young man fought with the controls of his stereo, attempting to turn the music down. He struggled with it for a few moments with a smile on his face, and not a sign of frustration. Paul looked back at the group with an expression of wonder.

"He's cute," whispered Liv to Jen who nodded in agreement with a small smirk. Anna, who also heard the comment, stared at the boy coldly.

The young man finally got control of the stereo and brought the volume level down to the point they could hear what he said. He looked at each of them out of the window, pausing on Liv for a moment, and spoke.

"You guys seem like you need a ride."

"Couldn't hurt, where are you going?" asked Paul, amazed by the coolness in his voice.

"Well," replied the young man with a smile, "besides no where fast? I guess I'm headed that way." He pointed ahead and took a big sip from a canteen, grimacing as he swallowed.

"Where did you come from?" questioned Jen.

"Well, I guess I came from back there," he drunkenly turned his finger from pointing forward to pointing behind him. Scott guffawed in the background.

"Do you want in or not?" he asked. "I gotta keep movin' here," he pointed to the body of a small antlered deer in the back of the truck.

Paul turned to the group for some kind of direction. Most of them looked at him with shrugs of indecision.

"Screw it, I'm tired of walking," said Wes, who tossed the large pillowcase of soaps and shampoo he carried into the bed of the truck and hopped in. The rest of the group followed his lead, with Paul and Liv taking the front seat. As soon as Liv closed the passenger door the truck took off.

This doesn't feel right, thought Anna as the wind blew against her face.

* * *

The young man introduced himself as Cory and offered Paul the canteen. Paul took it and drank a small sip of the liquid. The substance exploded in his mouth and throat and his eyes immediately watered. He did his best to hide the concoction's strength but couldn't help but cough and gasp after it went down.

"Jesus, man, what is that shit, lighter fluid?"

"Naw, it's just some kind of home brew. You'll get used to it," answered Cory, chuckling at Paul's discomfort. He had become accustomed to the drink.

Liv snatched the canteen from Paul without an offer and drank. She wanted to show she could still slug one back, and she wanted to out do Paul in front of their new friend. She could drink, and back in the day there wasn't a shot of whiskey or tequila that could even make her grimace, but what went down her throat was unlike anything she'd ever shot before. She exploded into a coughing fit and gags and was only able to swallow half of it down without gagging. It burned her throat and sinuses. Both Cory and Paul laughed at her as tears rolled down from her eyes.

"Oh my…God…*uhhhh.*"

Even the small sip was enough to burn in her stomach and make her feel light headed.

"So, Cory, tell us about yourself," asked Paul.

"Like I said, I'm Cory. I'm a…hunter. Really, that's it...oh, I love this song!"

He turned the volume up, so much that the group of them sitting in the back could hear every

beat and guitar riff. It was fast heavy metal now and Cory gave them the sign of the devil and stuck out his tongue as he bobbed his head to the song. Their speed also increased with the blasting beat of the drum and guitar. The truck veered from side to side on the highway, occasionally rubbing the rumble strips on either shoulder. The vibrations buzzed though the truck, enough that Deacon knocked on the back window with a concerned look on his face. Paul waved back to him signaling everything was fine. The speed at which they travelled was far greater than anything they had experienced for a very long time. Mountains and trees flew by as the truck cruised down the road ignoring the lanes.

Paul and Liv were taken up in the moment more than those in the back. The music was far louder inside, and the speed didn't seem nearly as excessive. They both took another hit of the canteen, this time far more carefully, and the alcohol made them feel fuzzy and relaxed. Cory turned to them and smiled as he drove. It was at that moment Paul realized he only had four fingers on each hand.

* * *

In the back, Wes's enthusiasm for the ride was starting to wane. The stench from the dead deer that crowded all of them into the corners of the box was weak because of the wind that blew by, but its dead eyes still gave him a chill. Over and over the vibration of the rumble strips came up through the tires and rattled both his teeth and his nerves. The guy was driving like an absolute maniac. Deacon was equally uncomfortable as he sat with one hand grabbing the side of the cab and his other wrapped tightly around Jen. Anna and Scott sat in each corner against the tailgate with the wind furiously whipping their hair.

"This guy is insane!" yelled Deacon as loudly as he could to overcome the roar of the wind and the music.

"I don't like this!" yelled Anna. "I don't have a good feeling about this, Deacon! I didn't have

a good feeling from the start."

"Neither did I," muttered Deacon to himself. "Neither did I."

* * *

Paul stared at the fingers. He tried rubbing his eyes thinking that the drink may have messed him up a little. But each time he turned around he saw that there were only four unnaturally hinged fingers wrapped around the steering wheel. There was no thumb whatsoever. Liv seemed not to notice, watching out the window at the passing trees and turning the occasional excited smile over at the driver. The music continued to blare and Paul felt his fists clench on his lap. He'd thrown his brand new rifle carelessly into the back when he got in. It was behind the rear windshield, and it might as well have been behind a wall of concrete blocks.

Cory reached his four fingered hand to turn the music down enough that they could have a conversation again. It still blared another heavy rock song and he yelled to overpower it.

"So, what are seven young people, such as yourselves, doing all alone on the side of an empty highway?" he asked.

Paul found himself unable to speak, so Liv answered his question after a short pause, still completely oblivious.

"We've been traveling for a while now. Doing the *nomad* thing," she spoke loudly and gave a bit of a shrug. "It's not the most glamorous lifestyle, but I guess we've managed to come this far."

"Wow, that's great. So where are you going anyway?" asked Cory with the same smile on his face. Paul thought he noticed his teeth seemed funny. Too sharp.

"I guess we're going to take a run toward the coast. I suppose that it's not *completely* decided…nothing ever is with us…hey, why don't you turn that music down if you want to chat?" said Liv.

He reached and turned the music down again, barely a decibel. The rumbling of the heavy rock was still loud enough for everyone in the back to hear.

"Better?" asked Cory. "I hope you don't mind, but I love this music of yours!"

"It's not my kind of music, if that's what you mean!" answered Liv. "Anyway, like I said, we're heading to B.C., better weather for the winter."

"That makes sense, I guess. So you're telling me you guys have never given any thought to crossing over?"

Paul felt his heart jump in his chest. He looked over at the odometer and it read one hundred and sixty kilometers per hour. Trees and rocks ripped by the truck and the solid yellow lines separating the lanes disappeared beneath the front hood like a slithering snake. Paul couldn't be sure, but he thought Cory's hands were turning dark grey.

"Crossing over? What, the border?" answered Liv. "Yeah, I guess we've thought about it, but I hear the States is as messed up as anywhere else. We've heard Utah might be a place to go. My friend Jen thinks so, but you'll have a tough time getting her to admit it."

Cory laughed at the comment. "If you only knew about Utah, my dear, if you only knew!" He continued to laugh along with the music, a laugh that seemed to become more and more of a bark as it went on.

Liv smiled, a little confused, and took another swig from the canteen.

* * *

"My God, Deacon, we're going too fast! I think I'm gonna be sick," said Jen as the truck weaved from side to side.

"This guy has got to be pissed!" yelled Anna. "I thought I could smell something when we hopped in."

"There's not much I can do from back here," shouted Deacon. He turned and again knocked hard on the back window and Paul looked back with an expression of terror.

"Oh, Jesus, Anna, I think you're right!" said Deacon after seeing the expression on Paul's face. "I don't like this at all."

Behind the glass Paul lifted the four fingers on his right hand and placed them against the back window hidden behind his head.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" asked Scott. "Are we going four hundred kilometers an hour?"

Deacon didn't know.

* * *

"No, you silly girl!" said Cory. "I don't mean the border of your little land. Have you ever thought of crossing over the gateways…the portals…the mirrored doorways?"

Liv scrunched her forehead in confusion, but was interrupted by Deacon's knocking from the back. Cory looked back at Deacon with a pointy smile.

"What is wrong with that friend of yours back there? Not fast enough I suppose! Let's see what this thing can do!"

They sped up and Paul saw the odometer hit its maximum, the old truck could not do any more. Paul could see wisps of steam beginning to streak over the hood from the radiator.

"Crossing over the portals!" said Liv, a little surprised by the question, but also starting to feel a little drunk. "Wes and Deacon talk about it sometimes. It's funny you mention it. We have this weird thing going on where all these people keep trying to tell us that we should. You know, cross over and all. It's strange, they're complete strangers. But there's no way Paul, here, would go for it! He's a pretty straight shooter. Aren't ya, Paul!" Liv punched him on the shoulder.

Paul looked at her with an expression of frozen dread.

"C'mon, Paul! Lighten up a bit!" said Liv loud enough for both of them to hear and then turned to whisper loudly into Paul's ear. "I know he's drunk...but relax, there are no other cars on the road. We'll be fine."

Paul turned and whispered into her ear, "Grey Man."

* * *

"The idiot is speeding up!" said Scott as the truck jolted forward. "I might have to kick this pretty boy's ass when we stop!"

Deacon nodded. The thought of knocking some sense into the kid already crossed his mind. The speed was ridiculous now, even if he was drunk, or trying to show off. Deacon thought he could smell coolant in the air, and every now and then he could sense a tire lifting off the ground when a turn was too sharp. He looked around at the trees flying by and realized it was misty out. Not heavy, by any means, but he could see a haze in the air, especially when he stared at the rock of the distant mountains. *What the hell does four fingers mean? Four what?*

"Why isn't Paul making this idiot slow down?" asked Jen, livid, and already planning what she was going to say to both Paul and the driver when they got off of this rollercoaster.

Deacon stared at the hoof of the deer that separated them all in the back of the truck. Most of the animal was tied up in a blood soaked blanket. Deacon let go of the side of the truck and lifted a large piece of blanket away. What he saw made his breath catch in his throat and adrenaline course through his body. The carcass of the deer was, in fact, the broken and bloodied dead body of a young man. What Deacon thought were hooves were cowboy boots, what he saw as antlers was a cowboy hat.

Another trick of the mist.

"C'mon, Deek, I don't need to stare at Bambi. Besides, it reeks. Cover it up!" said Scott from the back. He showed no shock. No one did. They still saw the deer.

It was then that they all noticed Paul's right hand showing the sign of a gun against his head with his thumb steadily clicking open and closed

* * *

Liv turned and raised a brow at Paul. *What the hell does Paul mean? Grey Man?* She peered down the highway and across to the shoulder on each side looking for any sign of the creature that Paul mentioned, but she saw nothing but the passing trees and boulders.

Cory continued to lecture on.

"Crossing over the portals is certain death, you know. Things sure change when you get beyond this green little paradise of yours. You'll meet your doom if you ever dare to, but I suppose it won't matter after today…."

"I can't see anything, Paul," said Liv, searching hard for some sign of the creature out the window. She spoke loud enough for both of them to hear.

"Hmm. Maybe you're not actually lying to me," said Cory. "You've not even considered crossing over?" He laughed again and took the canteen back from Liv with his four fingered hand. She handed it over without a care, still completely oblivious.

"We can leave passing across the portals to the Army," said Liv, still yelling over the music. "Hey, Cory, could you slow down a bit? I appreciate getting some clicks behind us, but this is ridiculous."

He seemed to not even hear her. "Well, I can't say I'm surprised," he laughed again. "Maybe you're not all that you've been made out to be!"

Liv turned her head, now completely confused by Cory's comments, and her jaw fell open. She saw the grey four fingered hand and suddenly understood Paul's comment. Paul's frozen dread passed over to her.

* * *

"Just look at it!" screamed Deacon but it did no good. They still saw a dead deer.

"What, Deacon, what?" yelled Scott, now panicking, "A deer!—a goddamn deer! What the hell should we see?"

Deacon reached down and pried the cowboy boot from the dead body. To the rest of them it looked like he pulled the bottom of the deer's leg off with ease. Their jaws dropped in amazement.

Deacon lifted the deer's leg up in his hand and pointed to it with his other and screamed, "This is...a cowboy…boot!"

The hoof in his hand morphed into the shape of a boot and they all stared at it amazed. Deacon then pointed down at the dead carcass in front of him. They looked down and recoiled in horror to the far corners of the truck. The deer carcass beneath the bloody blanket was now the rotting dead body of a young man.

* * *

"What? Has a kitty-cat got your tongue?" asked Cory. His mouth was now full of sharp jagged teeth that made his face lumpy and his speech sound choppy. "I asked you if a man with a fiddle came to see you?"

"No," said Paul, answering for Liv who was now too scared to speak. Her knuckles were white as they dug into the dashboard in front of her.

"Oh, you humans are good liars!" said Cory whose eyes and skin were getting darker and darker. His once blue eyes took on a shade of grey.

"I'm not lying, Cory. We haven't met anyone like that," said Paul.

"You're lying, but it doesn't matter. He probably filled your little minds full of all sorts of grand ideas that would have gotten you *killed,* possibly worse." The word "killed" in his sentence reminded Paul of the same guttural voice that came from the Creeper back at Sunwapta Falls.

The illusion had almost completely melted away.

* * *

"What do we do!" shouted Wes with his arms wrapped tightly around the dog. "What do we do!"

From the back the driver's head no longer wore a cowboy hat. It was a smooth grey angled scalp with two large pointed ears. Their chauffer was a Grey Man.

"I don't know….Pass me the rifle," yelled Deacon, whose heart hammered in his chest. He was finding it hard to breathe from both the gusting wind and the fear in his stomach.

The answer of what to do came quickly as Paul started to show a countdown on his fingers. He made a gun with his fingers and then his fingers began counting down to two. He had not yet shown a one. Deacon grabbed the rifle and knocked on the window.

* * *

"Where are you taking us!" cried Liv. She could no longer control her fear, or her tears.

"Like I said, I'm taking you nowhere fast, beautiful," said the now completely transformed grey creature that sat beside them. "To think I almost didn't recognize you…very clever…there are

seven of you but there are supposed to be five men and two women... *very clever indeed.* Enough chatter, it's time to find us all a nice little mountainside, or cliff, and finally end this little charade. They will make songs about me in Tartarus!"

Paul heard Deacon tap from behind him on the glass and a glimmer of hope burst into his heart. He counted his fingers down as the truck flew toward a tight curve ahead. The truck lurched and more tendrils of steam erupted from under the hood as they sped ever forward. Four. Three. Two. One.

* * *

"Hold on!" yelled Deacon as he placed the end of the rifle against the glass. He fired just as Paul dropped his final finger and formed a clenched fist. The back window exploded, along with most of the driver's head, and a dark red fluid splashed across the windshield and interior. The volume of the music assaulted them through the new opening, and it continued to blare throughout the chaos and confusion that followed.

With the blast Paul slammed his foot onto the brake, but he did it too hard, and he, Liv, and the now dead creature slammed into the dashboard. Deacon found himself thrown into the cab of the truck from the force of the brake.

"Too hard!" yelled Deacon, and Paul pulled his foot from the brake jarring all of their heads backwards again. The truck swerved off the highway and onto a grassy embankment. They were still going fast when they bounced off of a small hill. The force drunkenly threw the dead body of the young man right out of the truck and onto the grass. Bags of soap, clothes, rifles, and gear also went with it. Scott nearly joined the body flung from the back of the truck, but managed to catch the tailgate and pull himself back in.

The windshield was covered with blood and Deacon couldn't see a thing, but he still grabbed onto the steering wheel. Liv, somewhat dazed, yelled at him.

"Left! Left! LEFT!"

Deacon struggled with the wheel and managed to turn the vehicle with Paul's help. Deacon's legs were still in the back of the truck and he could feel small shards of glass digging into his stomach and sides.

"Paul! Brake!" screamed Liv again. She was the only one of them that could see anything more than the dark maroon blood glowing on the windshield from the sunshine.

Paul pushed again on the brake, this time not so hard as to send his forehead into the dash board, but hard enough he had to brace himself with his arm. They came to a stop only a few feet before a large drop into a forested riverbed.

They did not need to shut off the engine as it stalled with a clunk. Smoke and steam hissed from beneath the hood into the air.

Paul, covered in splatter and with a nose full of his own blood, turned and spoke thickly to Deacon, whose sides were bleeding and head was almost entirely through the opening in the steering wheel.

"No more hitchhiking."

Chapter 23 – Do Not Feed the Wildlife

Wesley David - Entry # 23

Perception can be a funny thing.

We took a ride with a drunken Grey Man today. Yes, you read that right. Apparently Paul and Liv had a pretty involved conversation with it too, but they don't seem ready yet to repeat what it said. When it first stopped and I looked at him (it?), he seemed nice enough, long hair (I think), cowboy hat, western style clothes. But when I try to bring his face back into my mind, I can't. It's kinda fuzzy.

It makes me wonder how much we truly see in our everyday lives. Are we are all so caught up in the darkness of our own thoughts and problems we can't let in the light from outside? How many times did I lose my keys when they were out on the counter clear as day in front of me? How many times when I drove would I miss my turn thinking about something else? Maybe we are all so caught up in our own lives, and in our own perceptions, we can't see what is right in front of us. What am I missing right now?

But the mist changes everything. It strips away the barriers we build around ourselves, making us vulnerable to our fears, our emotions, and our imaginations.

And this is not a time to be vulnerable.

* * *

The clouds in the sky were a brilliant red as the group sat outside the stalled truck, warming their hands and staring into a small fire. They spent the last few hours collecting the things that had flown out of the back. They scoured for bullets, shampoo bottles, and snacks with moderate success. Deacon and Scott spent an hour digging a hole for the body of the young man who rode lifelessly in the back of the truck. They did not know if his name had been Cory, or if it was something the Grey

Man came up with. The digging turned out to be a great deal of work in the rocky soil with limited tools, so they tossed the body of the Grey Man off the side of the steep cliff rather than spend the time and effort digging it a hole. They gave the young man a small funeral, where only Jen said a few words. Most of them felt relief for themselves rather than sadness for the young man, as they no longer had to smell the decay of his body or deal with the flies it attracted. As they sat by the fire they passed around what remained of the flask of alcohol. There was some discussion as to what it was, Paul suspected some kind of badly fermented potato vodka, but it served its purpose, taking the edge off a difficult day.

"I can't believe you guys are drinking that," said Jen. "You *are* aware that a Grey Man's lips were on that thing."

Scott coughed as he downed a short sip of the harsh liquid. "You paint a pretty picture, Jen. Thanks."

"I don't think that creature's cooties are anything to be too concerned about, Jen. It comes pretty far down on the 'Things That Are Gonna Kill Us' list," said Deacon as he took the flask from Scott and mentally prepared himself for another sip.

The smoke from the fire slowly floated up into the distance and they stared at it against the bright red background.

"Who do you think he was?" asked Liv.

"The dead cowboy or the Grey Man?" asked Deacon.

"The body, the cowboy….Where was he from? What was he doing by himself? How was he killed by that thing? I wonder who he was," said Liv.

"The lucky bastard's dead, does it really matter now?" asked Anna. Her voice surprised them. It reminded them how little she'd said over the past few days.

"I guess not," answered Liv. "But I still wonder."

There was a short silence and Anna spoke. "He was from Calgary. He was around our age. His

name *was* Cory, how that Grey Man knew is anyone's guess….He dressed like a cowboy but he was from the suburbs and he didn't like country music too much. He lost his mother not long ago, it was one of the reasons he was always so willing to go out hunting. He didn't fear death at all. His father is an important person. The Grey Man tricked him much like he tricked us, somehow appearing to be human. There are people that are worried about him as we speak. Worried about him, and a companion that came with him, and the truck. He has someone special back at—I'm…I'm freaking you guys out."

The six of them stared at her, many with their mouths dropped open or expressions of disbelief on their faces. Even Lucky seemed to be quietly examining her.

Paul was the first to snap out of it. "No…no! Anna, you're not freaking us out. Continue."

Anna looked at the ground.

"C'mon, Anna, we've all suspected that you've been holding out on us for a while now. Spill it," said Paul.

Anna looked up shyly and continued. "He had someone special. He will be missed."

There was stunned silence when she finished. Almost on cue, the sun fell below the horizon and they knew they would be spending the night there. Liv shivered as the cool air set in.

"How do you know these things?" asked Wes, who could not hold in his curiosity.

"Images. Feelings. Pictures that come into my head," answered Anna. "I don't know where they come from, but I've had it all my life, much more strongly in my childhood. Since The Arrival, and especially since we met Sara Williams, it has been," she paused, "reawakened." She was a little relieved everyone believed what she said. She feared they would think it was the stress affecting her mind, or in the worst case, possibly think she'd finally gone completely insane. Anna thought that she just might have, but regardless, she knew what she said to be true.

"And what else do you know, Anna?" asked Wes. "About us? About what's going on?"

"I don't know much about that. I get some feelings now and then but nothing concrete. I know

we need to head to that hotel. The image of it sitting on the mountain has come into my mind again and again. There is a room there we have to find. I also know some of us are special. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that though, especially with what Paul has been able to do. Some of the things that come to me are crystal clear, and other things are hazy. Like a misty day. I'm not sure but I think we should be listening to what people keep telling us. About the portals and going over…I know that the Grey Man in that truck told you guys not to."

Paul and Liv looked at her with even more astounded gazes.

"Jesus, Anna. It's a good thing we're not back in Salem in the seventeen hundreds, you'd be burned at the stake," muttered Scott.

"Scott!" said Jen sternly, but she was interrupted.

"It told you guys not to cross over?" asked Deacon amazed.

"That's not all, Deek. It asked us if we'd met a man with a fiddle," said Liv quietly.

Even Anna seemed surprised with this revelation.

"Joshua?" said Deacon. "Wow."

"But what does it all mean?" asked Wes.

The only response he received was the crackling of the fire.

* * *

The sky was red again that night. It was early, and Scott could see his breath when he lifted his head out from under his blankets. The sky reminded him of an old sailor's saying he couldn't get exactly right. His eyes adjusted to the light and the sleep took some time to dissipate. When he could finally see clearly he swallowed hard. Paul stood up above him at full height, rigid, with his rifle pointed toward him.

"Paul…what exactly are you doing?" asked Scott slowly and quietly enough not to startle him.

"Something I should have done a long time ago," said Paul as slowly and quietly as Scott had spoken to him.

Suddenly the rifle fired. A boom echoed across the valley.

Scott closed his eyes and froze at the tremor of the sound so early in the morning. He didn't know if it was shock, but he could not feel any pain. He couldn't feel anything. But why would Paul shoot him? It didn't make sense. Yelling and commotion erupted around him as his companions struggled to free themselves of their bedding and get to their feet. With his face still tight with terror, Scott slowly opened his eyes to see Paul smiling and pointing above him. Scott turned his head to see the body of a small deer only a few feet behind him. It still twitched.

"Wakey wakey, eggs and bakey!" said Paul laughing.

Scott was both too angry and too relieved to even offer a response, and he pulled the blankets back over his head with curse.

* * *

"Well, what was I supposed to do?" asked Paul with raised eyebrows. "Was I supposed to yell, 'Hey everyone, there's a deer in our campsite, kindly wake up and get mentally prepared for a gunshot'?"

"Still, waking up to a gunshot always gets the day off to a bad start," said Deacon.

"The good news is we've got breakfast, right?" said Paul still smiling. He thought this was all very amusing, and he just couldn't wipe the smug look from his face, making it more and more difficult for the rest of them to move on.

"I swear, you enjoy being an asshole," said Jen, who was the angriest behind only Scott, who had been nearly in Paul's line of sight, and by far the closest to the blast. He had still not even brought his head out from beneath his blankets.

"I'm sorry, okay," continued Paul who was now having trouble speaking because an uncontrollable giggle had taken hold. "It walked…*it just…sashayed*…into our camp like that… I…I…."

"Yeah, real mature, Paul," muttered Jen, who got up and walked off into the distance.

"What? C'mon…" said Paul to her.

"Here you go, pal," said Deacon slapping a large knife onto Paul's hand. "You catch 'em, you clean 'em."

* * *

They spent the morning watching Paul struggle with the deer carcass, with only Wes offering any kind of assistance, helping to lift the body over the side of the truck to bleed it. Scott and Deacon walked back almost a kilometre to find a safe path down to the river below to fill up buckets and bottles with water. It was setting up to be a warm day after a chilly morning.

Scott and Deacon thought it was going to be a struggle to get the old truck started again. They thought they might as well do what they could while Paul butchered the deer and the girls cooked and dried the meat. To their surprise, and to the enthusiastic cheers of the group, the truck turned over on the first try. All it needed was some water in the radiator. After cleaning his nicely healing arm, Wes tested the radio in the truck, slowly turning through the AM and FM channels with the volume at maximum. He found nothing more than the fuzzy murmur of a religious station where the only word he could occasionally make out was "Isack." In the end, Wes concluded the enormous mountains surrounding them likely wouldn't have allowed for very much reception even in the best of times.

Their terrifying joyride turned out to be a blessing in disguise as they once again had a vehicle. They spent their time cooking and drying the deer and loading their belongings back in to the truck as the haze slowly began to thicken over the course of the morning. As time passed, a large group of

crows began to surround the ground where Paul did his butchering. He occasionally tossed a ligament or organ onto the now hot asphalt for the birds and Lucky to fight over.

"Hey, Paul!" yelled Scott from the back of the truck where he laid in the sun with his feet dangling over the side. "Didn't you read the signs? *It's unlawful to feed the wildlife."*

Paul looked up at Scott with the bloody knife in his hand. "Does it say anything about shooting the wildlife?"

"It says you're in deep shit."

"Like it matters," muttered Paul as he dug the knife back into the meat. "I think I've broken every law there is already, Scotty. I don't think shooting this dear even makes my top one hundred list." Paul finished by flinging another sinewy hunk of venison toward the birds.

The thought of Jessica Grainger came to Scott and rest of the group and the humor in his comment quickly died.

"We're starting to attract attention," said Anna, looking up at the circling birds. Her face was flushed with heat and covered in ash from the fire she cooked over. "It's time for us to go."

Deacon sat up in the back of the truck. "Is that your common sense, or one of your *feelings*?"

"A bit of both."

"Then its time for us to go," said Deacon seriously. "Paul, wash up, we've got plenty of bullets and there's plenty more game out there. We've got enough."

"Gimme half an hour, Deek," answered Paul, completely engrossed in his work. "I've still got half a side here."

"We've got enough, Paul," said Deacon looking off into the distance.

Paul stopped, catching the tone of Deacon's voice. "Okay, Deek. Okay. We've got enough."

Paul tossed the last piece of meat onto the grill of the fire and grabbed the large pail of water to clean up. Anna's ability to detect danger had proven itself to them before, and the quiet undertones of her comment got everyone in the group moving. Bedding, pails, garbage cans, and poles were loaded

into the truck in no time. The last of the meat was left undercooked and they decided it would have to be their evening meal as it was hurriedly packed away. A damp grey smoke rose from the fire into the haze of the day as they dumped the bloody and soiled wash water onto it. Paul and Wes took the front seat of the truck as the rest of them made seats out of bedding in the back. Before the truck was even put into gear the crows attacked the remains of the deer. Their number had grown dramatically.

"Why do they call a group of crows a murder?" asked Scott.

"I have no idea," answered Deacon quietly.

Above them the birds cawed.

* * *

Paul drove much faster in the truck than in the Lincoln. His speed was nowhere near what the Grey Man had been traveling at, but the breeze still lifted their hair as the trees and mountains steadily passed. Paul wanted to get to some distance behind him as there was very little time before the winter would arrive. *We need less drama and more distance. Why conserve gas anyway? From the sound of the engine we could lose this thing at any time.* Deacon asked Paul why he was traveling so fast, not because he minded, but it seemed very unlike Paul to waste anything when not absolutely necessary.

"Well, Deek. There comes a time in every man's life," answered Paul with a smirk, "that he has to put the pedal to the metal."

"That doesn't sound like you," said Deacon.

"Oh, *really*. Why? Do I always have to mother the group?"

"Um, yes," said Deacon.

Scott, who had been listening from behind them through the broken window chimed in. "Mommy, I have to pee! Please stop, Mommy."

Paul actually laughed. "Well, if you must know, I figure since we're headed off to the Banff

Springs Hotel anyway, and because this truck doesn't feel like its gonna make it, I think we might as well get as far as we can before it dies."

"See, I knew it!" exclaimed Deacon. "*Paul wasting gas without a reason,* impossible! I was starting to think maybe you were sick, or the haze was messing with your head. It's good to know our Paul is still himself. "

"Thanks," Paul said drily.

"Mommy, I wasn't kidding, I have to piss!" said Scott, crossing his legs.

"Next stop, honey. I promise," said Paul.

* * *

The next stop, nearly an hour later, was the border of the small tourist town of Banff. Throughout the hour, Scott complained bitterly at Paul to stop, and finally threatened to urinate into the cab of the truck if he didn't. When they finally arrived he jumped off the side before they even came to a complete stop, and started going before his pants reached his ankles. He finished after what seemed like an eternity, and floated back to the truck with a smile of relief on his face.

"So, what's the plan now?" asked Wes, putting away his notebook.

"We go in," said Paul quietly.

"It's been a while since we were in an urban area like this," said Wes, "I can only imagine what awaits us."

"Nothing but fun and excitement, I'm sure," muttered Scott.

"Just be aware," said Paul. "I think we should go in and look for anything we can scrounge, especially clothes. I'm getting a little tired of my bed sheet. Then we make our way to the hotel. Cool?"

They quietly agreed and readied their rifles.

* * *

"Explore the Majesty of the Rockies" said a large sign as they made their way into town. "Do Not Feed the Wildlife" said another. It was a common sign throughout the parks that always made Scott laugh, and every time they went by one he would yell, "We're trying not to!" They approached another large sign that read: "Visit the Beautiful Banff Springs Hotel!" It showed a magnificent Scottish castle that rested on the side of a huge tree covered mountain. The picture made the hotel seem old and sinister in a way. It looked out of place in a town filled with small wooden homes and shops; like an iceberg next to an ice cube.

"*That's* where we're headed?" asked Anna with trepidation. She felt goosepimples break out all over her body when she saw the sign.

"Oh, don't worry—look, it has a mineral spa and a full gymnasium for your enjoyment," said Scott. "Rooms starting at two hundred dollars! Maybe we better stop at the Banff Budget Motel instead, Pauly, I'm near broke."

"Something tells me we'll be in for a discount," replied Paul.

They passed out of the trees into the town proper. In the forest it was easy to pretend that nothing had changed, that they were only on an extended camping trip, away from the civilized world for a time. But the burned out shops and dirty street of this once immaculate tourist area were the first signs that all was not right. The smell of smoke, the hidden eyes, and the scattered human remains reminded them how bad things truly were.

Deacon was the first to see a creature. A lone Fang smelling something in a distant back alley looked up at them and sniffed as they drove by, but it was far more interested in what it already had than the difficult meal the group would make. Occasionally, they pointed out an eye behind a windowsill, at times human. They pointed their rifles, but no shots were fired. Paul stopped the truck in the middle of the road next to a group of large two storey shops. Their roofs were steep and large

logs made up most of the exterior, a remnant of long forgotten architectural rules.

"Up there," said Paul, pointing to the upper level. "It's an old ski shop. Angela and I bought some gloves there once. There used to be a shit-load of stuff. We should check it out."

Jen looked up at the disheveled building and frowned. "Really, Paul, what are the chances we're gonna find anything? It's probably looted like the rest of this town. I don't like this idea one bit."

"When do you ever like anything that's a little risky?" interrupted Deacon in Paul's defense. "Besides, no one ever got anywhere without taking a chance, right?" His eyes slid over to Liv and he quickly looked off into the distance. Jen didn't seem to notice.

"Alright, Deacon's with me. Scott, you stay here with the shotgun and guard the truck. Wes, you should probably stay too, and take the axe," said Paul. The weapon seemed useless now, compared to their newly acquired rifles. Wes pretended to act a little disappointed that he wouldn't be joining their sojourn into the building, but inside he was relieved. "And someone's got to man the wheel. We may need a getaway driver."

"I can woman the wheel," said Jen wryly.

"And I can help," said Liv. She wanted to go inside the building even less than Wes.

"We could use someone to help us bring out the loot," said Deacon. He turned to Anna. "Are you getting any feelings on this one?"

"Just my common sense," said Anna. "It says going in there for a jacket or two is plain stupid. I can't stop you guys, I know nothing can stop Paul when his mind is made up, but I sure as hell am not going in there," said Anna so sternly that she reminded them of Jen.

"I'm neither surprised nor disappointed," said Paul, quietly enough only Deacon heard him as they walked toward the entrance.

* * *

There were a tense few moments as they sat in the truck awaiting Paul and Deacon's return. Scott stayed focused with his shotgun raised, aiming at everything that moved around them from the boughs of the browning elm trees to the occasional crow that flapped over the building tops. They could hear Scott breathing as they waited. Wes, who was right beside him, thought he could even hear his heart beating. Lucky growled as a heavy mist suddenly poured out from the door that the two entered.

* * *

Paul realized as they reached the second floor that he'd made a hasty decision. It wasn't just trying to shut up Anna and Jen that made him hop off of the truck. It was that he really did want some new clothes. The Sergeant had teased them about the sheets they were wearing and it weighed on his mind. They were about to go to this hotel, and likely meet all kinds of new people. What would they think of them all draped in bedding? What would they think of *his* group looking like that? He felt like a father sending his dirty children to school in potato sacks while the other kids were dressed in designer clothes. Paul realized this decision came down to ego, and that ego could get him killed. He was risking their lives to make a good first impression. *What kind of an impression will a dead body make?*

"It's seems a bit cloudy in here," observed Deacon from behind.

"A bit? It is *very cloudy* in here, man," muttered Paul in response.

They passed through a short corridor and made their way into the shop. It was like they were walking through a dream, where the mist was so thick you couldn't even see your own feet, like a scene out of an old black and white vampire movie. They both carried their rifles, loaded, against their shoulders like a two man SWAT team. Finally, at the end of the corridor a sign read, *Rocky Mountain*

Goods.

"Okay, here it is, look sharp," whispered Paul.

Paul reached down and pushed the metal door handle. The cold knob turned easily, but the door opened with difficulty. They heard the sounds of dirt and broken glass scraping along the floor as Paul struggled to push it open. He could smell wet decay inside, like an old locker room.

"See anything?" asked Deacon, who watched the corridor behind them.

"Not yet."

"Maybe we should get back, Paul. It's getting pretty thick. Nothing good happens when this stuff gets too thick."

"We're already here. Let's have a quick look."

They made their way into the disheveled shop and found very little left of use. Old empty displays and racking were strewn about the floor. They could only see the occasional ski boot and pole laying about. There was no clothing to speak of. The looters in the early days of The Arrival left nothing for them.

"Damn, I should have known better than to try a shop," said Paul, kicking a package of ski wax across the room. "We would have been better off searching the attics and basements of the surrounding houses."

"I agree, man, let's get out—"

Suddenly the door of the shop closed with a dull thud.

Paul and Deacon stared at each other and raised their rifles toward the door.

"Alone, alone, alone..." taunted a familiar voice. The very same that tormented them when Scott was lost in the fog. The voice of the mist.

Deacon felt his chest tighten so much at the sound that he couldn't breathe. Paul spun around, aiming his rifle at the nothingness.

"I remember you...do you remember me?"

"Can you hear that, Deek?" asked Paul with his hands locked around his rifle.

"Yes," whispered Deacon.

The room was steadily filling with hot mist and becoming like a sauna. There were windows at the front of the shop, but they became only bright squares of light grey in the fog.

"How does a voice close a door, Paul?" asked Deacon, still aiming his rifle directly at the door.

"I don't know, man. I don't know."

Sounds suddenly came from outside. They couldn't be sure what it was about, but they were sure it was the group.

"Why did we come up here, Paul?" asked Deacon.

"I don't know…for clothes…to find some clothes," answered Paul.

"Did you know there weren't going to be any clothes up here?"

"I…uh…yeah. Yeah, I think I knew," answered Paul. Sweat or condensation poured down his face, he wasn't sure which. His back was soaked and he could feel his finger slipping on the trigger of the rifle.

"I think I knew it too," admitted Deacon.

"*Of course you knew. I made you come up here*."

"Why?" asked Paul loudly.

"*To kill you,"* said the voice. There was a sudden laugh.

Paul turned around to see Deacon pointing his rifle at his head. Deacon's eyes filled with rage and his face was greased in sweat. Paul instantly pointed his own right back.

"*You brought me up here to kill me. Didn't you*?" asked Deacon. His face was contorted with rage.

"What? No! No! How could you think that?" asked Paul still pointing his rifle at him.

Suddenly, Deacon's voice came from behind him. "Who are you talking to?"

Paul quickly turned around to see Deacon behind him, looking terrified, but like himself with

his rifle still pointed at the door. He did a double take. Deacon was no longer pointing the rifle at him. Another illusion.

"Jesus, Deek. I saw you, you were going to shoot me."

"What?" muttered Deacon. "You're the last person I'm gonna shoot right now, Paul. What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm seeing things, Deek."

"*No, you're not! He wants to kill you!"* said the voice. They ignored it.

"You're not the only one. I saw Jen. She told me she knows," said Deacon.

"Knows what?" asked Paul.

"That I kissed Liv."

"You did what?" choked Paul.

"*Cheater Cheater Pumpkin Eater*!"

"Listen, it doesn't matter, we've got to get out of here," said Deacon. He rushed toward the door and pulled with all his might. It didn't budge.

* * *

Paul and Deacon ran from the entrance of the store through the fog that bellowed out of the building and jumped into the back of the truck.

"Go! Go! Go!" yelled Paul.

Jen slammed on the gas and they took off down the street. The truck plowed through the mist that collected on the asphalt and it separated like a zipper only to reform behind them as they sped by. Lucky began barking and growling in Wes's arms.

"It's okay, Lucky. It's okay," said Wes, trying to consol the dog.

"Jesus, what was in there?" asked Scott, waving the shotgun back and forth at anything that

might suddenly appear out of the mist.

"Give us a minute," said Paul. They both held their heads in their hands and struggled for breath. The dog continued to go wild as the truck flew down the abandoned streets.

* * *

"The door's shut tight. How are we gonna get out?" asked Deacon.

"*Trapped, trapped, trapped.*"

"Just let me think for a second!" said Paul.

"In the meantime, please don't shoot me, no matter what I say or what you see…that's exactly what it wants," said Deacon.

"*He's going to kiiiillllll yooouuuu. Kill. Kill. Kill,"* said the voice. It was no longer a whisper in the background now. It sounded like it was in the same room.

"I can't even describe what I see now," said Paul, who starred wide eyed at whatever it was that appeared to him in the mist.

"It's an illusion. The voice isn't real. The mist can't hurt us. Not without something real in it," said Deacon.

"Do we really *know* that? Maybe we should go for the window," said Paul.

"That's it! Jump! Jump! Jump!"

"Something tells me that's not a good idea," said Deacon.

"*We've got you this time. Ha! Ha! Ha!"*

"Shut up!" yelled Paul at the voice. "Maybe the door isn't closed! Maybe it's just an illusion, right?"

Deacon walked toward the door and grabbed it again. It was still shut tight.

"No, man, trust me, it's closed," said Deacon.

"Well, of course it is if that's how you *see* it," answered Paul who walked over. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and walked directly toward the closed door.

* * *

"C'mon, guys, you're not in that bad of shape!" said Liv, concerned with Paul and Deacon's continuing struggle for breath. They travelled along the road in relative silence for some time. "I've seen you run at full speed for half an hour straight, each of you! C'mon, what was…Jesus Christ, Wes! Would you shut that stupid dog up!"

"Yeah, Liv, I'm sorry, I'm trying," answered Wes who struggled to keep the dog in his arms. Lucky growled and barked in a way none of them had ever heard before. It was almost as if she were going rabid. "I think maybe the mist has got to her."

"What was in there?" continued Liv. "Are you hurt?"

"No," said one the guys. Liv couldn't even tell which one. The voice sounded strange, regardless.

What is wrong with them? They must have seen something fucked up in there, thought Scott as he watched Lucky struggle in Wes's arms. *The dog's never acted this strange before, and Lucky has spent her fair share of time in the fog.* It was at that very moment that it clicked for Scott. After almost five minutes of barreling down the road, Scott realized the two people that they picked up were not Paul and Deacon.

When were they going to learn?

Scott expected that the shotgun blast he let fly into the head of Paul would suddenly reveal a Grey Man beneath it. He turned his head and closed his eyes, expecting the same splatter of blood that came from the cowboy. Instead, the blast passed right through him. Jen slammed on the brakes at the sound, the girls screamed, having not yet realized what Scott already had. They thought Scott had just

shot Paul in cold blood. In the commotion Lucky managed to get loose from Wes and ran to bite the ankle of the illusion that was Deacon. The dog's mouth snapped shut on itself with a crack. The two human shapes looked up at them and smiled. Their faces were close to the men that they portrayed but their features were more exaggerated, in a strange and wicked way. The illusions of the two boys melted away as they drove, like a pile of sand in the wind.

* * *

Paul's face slammed into the cold wood of the door and he fell violently backwards onto his back.

"Do you believe me now?" asked Deacon, reaching down to help Paul back to his feet.

Paul truly believed the closed door was only an illusion, there hadn't been a doubt in his mind, and because of it he walked into the door hard. The impact came as a complete surprise, and Paul saw stars in the mist as he struggled to his feet.

In the background the voice continued to laugh.

"Illusions can't close doors, man. There's something behind it," said Paul, who continued to struggle for balance.

"Christ, I can only imagine what that could be," muttered Deacon.

The mist was so thick in the shop they could barely even see each other now. The light from the windows had almost completely faded away.

"Do we go for the windows?" asked Deacon.

"I think it's our only choice," answered Paul. They'd never been in mist this thick before, even when they were searching for Scott in the forest the mist did not even come close to the soup they were in now.

"Maybe if we knock out the windows it will drain out," said Deacon.

"That's not a bad idea," agreed Paul. "Here, take my hand, let's not lose each other now."

Deacon grasped onto Paul's hand and together they headed toward the windows as the mist swirled around them. Thick tendrils stood out from the rest of the fog like cigarette smoke in a still room. In the mist Deacon began to see things, what he thought were the shapes of old friends and family, the blurry faces of his companions, and the many people he'd met on his travels. They were rough, and imperfect, but he knew who they were supposed to be.

Paul saw things too, but they were clearer. He did not share Deacon's resistance, and what appeared to him was darker, and more troubling. He saw Jessica Grainger staring at him accusingly, her face bloody and torn to shreds. The fat George Wilson laughed at him from a couch in the distance. He could see the blood splatter across the windows of Anna's parent's house as they abandoned Ryan to his doom. The images made Paul decide to focus on the floor and the obstacles that blocked his way. He gasped when he saw that Deacon's hand was now midnight black, with four long fingers.

* * *

"Turn around, Jen!" yelled Scott through the busted back window at the top of his lungs. "Turn around! We left them behind! We left them back there!"

The dog howled along with Liv's wail of terror.

* * *

"Paul! Why'd you let go?" asked Deacon as he continued to stumble over the knocked down shelves and ski equipment that littered the floor.

"You're separated now!"

"Paul!" muttered Deacon, terrified at the prospect of being alone in the mist.

"How do I know that it's you?" said Paul. "Your hand… it's like a Creeper's. Black. Four fingers. How do I know you're not one of them?"

"It's me, Paul!" said a tall Creeper that wore Deacon's green T-shirt. His horrible face slurred the words through the sharp crystalline teeth as it spoke. "Jesus! You saved my life in Hinton. You traded a bottle of rum for gas…you can make bunny rabbits appear without a hat…among other things."

"He lies!"

Paul didn't move, still unconvinced.

"You're an arrogant asshole!" said the Creeper, who reached out his hand in the mist, a hand that to Paul, still appeared black and four fingered.

He grasped it.

* * *

Smoke flew from the tires of the truck as Jen pulled an abrupt three point turn on the wet asphalt of the street. The truck jolted forward and the tires squealed back toward the shop.

"Oh, Christ. What have we done?" muttered Wes, taking up Deacon's axe and crouching with Scott in the back. The wind blasted back their hair and they held on tightly to the inside windows to keep from falling off.

The mist collected in the gutters of the street as they got closer.

* * *

"Okay, let the window have it," said Paul as they finally reached them. Three large bay

windows angled outwards before them. Outside, they could see the mist collected on the street below as well, but had not yet topped a short pedestrian sign that stood on the corner. Above them, a blue sky was filled with only a few billowy clouds. It seemed as if they were peering out at another dimension from behind the glass, or into some fantastic painting.

Paul smashed the butt of his rifle against the window. It gave instantly under the force of his blow, drowning them both in shards of glass. Deacon was less conservative with his ammunition, and let a blast fly into the large bright window in front of him. It exploded, rather than collapsed, spreading shards into their faces and hair and down onto the street below.

The mist poured out of the open windows like water from a broken fish tank.

"It's working, Paul!" shouted Deacon with joy and relief, "it's clearing out!"

Paul smiled at the Creeper beside him and watched the mist drain from the second floor. His relief disappeared, however, as the door of the shop opened slowly. They could hear the horrible scraping of the glass and debris across the floor.

* * *

Scott heard the gunshot echo through the deserted city streets right over the sound of the engine and the wind in his ears. His jaw ached from clenching it so tightly, something he did in times of stress. He looked down to see his hands shaking. What would they do without Paul? What would they do without Deacon? Losing one, or both, of them would be catastrophic. Who would lead then? Him? *The group's fat assed idiot.* Leader, and decision maker, was not a position he wanted.

"Okay, we're almost there," said Scott as the building appeared in the distance. His voice was shaky as he continued, "We go right in…balls to the wall, guns blazing, right…Wes?"

"Well, yeah," said Wes who swallowed hard and struggled to breathe as the wind blew directly into his face. "Let's scope the situation quickly first, though, right? I mean, maybe they could be

waiting for us."

"How will we even know it's them this time?" squeaked Anna from the front seat.

Neither of them replied. Neither of them knew the answer.

* * *

"Something's opening the door!" said Deacon. Enough mist poured out of the windows to allow clear air to sink down to the top of Paul's head, which let Deacon, the taller of the two, see right over the top.

Paul struggled to jump high enough to get a view but it did little good.

"Something came in, Paul!" said Deacon who saw the shape of a hood floating above the top of the mist. It quickly advanced toward them with an awkward and stunted walk. A powder white hand with crimson red nails reached before it.

"We've found you!"

* * *

Jen slammed on the truck's horn from below the broken windows of the shop. Mist poured out like white waterfalls onto the street below.

* * *

"Jump, Deek!" yelled Paul who fired a shot in the direction of the advancing form. The sound of the blast rang in their ears.

It was the fear of what was coming through the door that gave Deacon the courage to push

himself from the glass strewn window frame down to the truck below. He crashed onto the roof and rolled off onto the hood. He was amazed when he realized he was relatively unhurt. Paul followed only a moment behind him, bouncing off the roof and rolling into the back.

They would discuss what appeared in the window in the days following. They all agreed something reached out for Paul's neck just as he jumped from the ledge onto the truck below. The image that they saw in the window that day was different for each of them but for most it was some kind of an unnaturally long arm. Some of them had a better view, and looked for a longer duration than the others, but they all had nightmares in the days following. They quietly debated exactly what it was they saw that day. But they all agreed it was the source of the voice. All of them heard the words as the truck sped off into the distance. The voice, as much in their heads as in their ears joyfully whispered.

"We've found you...."

Chapter 24 – The Devil Went Down to Georgia

Wesley David - Entry # 24

Only believe half of what you see and none of what you hear. Isn't that how the old saying goes? They're going to have to come up with a new one now: Don't believe anything at all.

We survived another attack today and the mist continues to play games with us. But this time it was something different. I can't quite put my hand on exactly what it is, but we are being hunted, or played with, by something. Something that doesn't like us much.

Sometimes when I think about what my life has become I can't breathe. This whole miserable situation. I struggle and have to remind myself over and over to move my diaphragm up and take air in, and push it down again to get it out. The anxiety of it all is killing me. Sometimes I feel like just letting go. I want to sit my tired, malnourished body down on the highway, with the warm asphalt pressed against my back, and stare into the cool blue sky and watch the clouds slowly pass. I'll wait... warm and comfortable... for a claw or tooth to end all of this madness.

"Boo-hoo, Wesley!" is what my older brother would say if he were still alive. "Suck it up, asswipe, and quit whining like a little pansy."

So I guess that's what I'm going to do. I can't believe I actually miss my brother Bill.

We're heading to the Banff Springs Hotel tomorrow. I stayed at the place once when I was a kid. It's huge, and damned nice from what I remember. I wonder what kind of terrible things are going to happen there?

"Boo-Hoo, Wesley. Boo-hoo."

* * *

"We're clear across town, Deacon. I think we've lost it," said Jen.

Deacon was shaken up from the experience. He could barely speak while they drove away,

causing some of them to wonder if they'd been duped again by yet another illusion. Luckily Paul took control, and was so much his usual self that their fears were allayed. The mist died quickly as they drove out of the shopping district and into the residential areas. There was a disagreement over heading directly to the hotel or finding somewhere else to stay for the night. In the end they agreed to look for an empty house and check it for food. Paul, surprisingly, was still interested in finding some new clothes and he argued everyone, including himself, needed some time to regroup before going on to the hotel.

"How long do you think we'll stay at the hotel, Paul?" asked Liv as they slowly drove through the mountain neighborhood. They kept an eye out for an ideal place to stop but it was difficult to even tell if the homes were abandoned as many were located at the top of steep driveways or situated deep in their lots.

"Who knows," answered Paul. "But hopefully we can pick up some supplies and take a load off there. That is, if they will even take us in."

"You think they won't?" asked Liv.

"It's hard to say. I'm wondering if going there is worth it at all. Just because there are people doesn't mean it's safe. We'll have to watch out for all kinds of trouble, human and otherwise."

"Then why are we even going?" asked Scott.

"Because we have to," said Anna quietly. "We have to."

Everyone looked at her after hearing the serious tone in her voice. Deacon lifted his head from his hands, his bloodshot eyes met Anna's, and he spoke. "You got another one of those feelings, Anna?"

"Yes. We have to go there. It's one thing I am absolutely sure of," answered Anna.

"Yeah, me too. There's something I never told you guys…something I have to admit," said Deacon, letting out a sigh as the truck slowly plodded along. He had their undivided attention, and Liv looked back at him with disbelief, like he was about to say something he shouldn't. Paul also looked at

Deacon with his eyebrows lifted. Any casual observer who was not hooked on what Deacon was about to say could see the three of them shared a secret.

"It's Sara Williams. Remember the day she pulled me aside and gave me that note?" asked Deacon, slowly and deliberately. Jen brought the truck to a near stop.

"She said that we had to go to the hotel…at the time I was confused, I had no idea what hotel she was talking about, I thought maybe it was Sunwapta Falls, but she said everything depended on it…and she said more."

There was a long pause and Jen brought the truck to a complete halt. She turned off the motor so she could hear the conversation. They looked at each other as the awkward silence stretched on.

"Well, c'mon then…what else did she say?" asked Scott, who was the first to lose his patience.

"She said…some of us will not go beyond."

Scott swallowed hard. They all looked at each other uncomfortably.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? Some of us are gonna die at the hotel?" asked Scott.

"Did anyone ever tell you you're a genius?" asked Liv.

"That doesn't necessarily mean that someone will die. Maybe some us will…stay there. You know, not go beyond," said Wes in as positive a voice as he could muster.

"Whoa! Whoa!" said Paul. "Have any of you considered that she's probably nuts. Don't let it bother you. Besides, we're all gonna die some day." Paul failed to cheer them up.

After a quiet moment of contemplation Jen restarted the engine and they recommenced their journey. They sat quiet and withdrawn as they searched for a place to stop. In time, they came to the end of a crescent and found an ideal old house left in disrepair. Jen, lost in thought, had not been watching the road and the house seemed to suddenly appear right in front of them. A large sign in front of the house read:

 # 11 Caribou Street, Richard and Mary Empire welcome you.

"Eleven is my lucky number," said Paul, staring at the small cottage.

It was a nice bungalow, and very old, likely owned by someone from the city that used it as a ski-house during the winter months. It was surrounded by so many trees that it could barely be seen from the road. Scott, Paul, and Deacon jumped from the truck and moved to surround the house. Scott was given Deacon's axe and the shotgun was left back with Wes to guard the truck.

As he walked toward the house Paul turned around and quietly spoke to Anna. "Is there anything interesting you're feeling or might want to tell us before we go in?"

"Just be careful."

* * *

Deacon was in no mood for trudging through the trees. He'd already been through a lot and wanted nothing more than to have a bite and to lie down for a while. He learned repeatedly over the last year that fear was exhausting. Not the exhaustion he'd become accustomed to in his muscles and joints, or how his lungs felt when he ran beyond what his body could take. It was an exhaustion of the mind, which made one lazy and careless. *Carelessness is something that we can't* —Deacon suddenly thought he could hear the sound of an instrument coming from inside the house. A fiddle…

* * *

Paul looked back angrily at Scott after he tripped on a small tree branch on the path in front of the house. Paul carefully stepped over it and did not feel the need to point it out. Scott could be such a buffoon, and it infuriated Paul. He needed competent help here; anyone or anything could be in the house.

"*Paul,*" whispered Scott's voice behind him.

Paul turned around this time with an even angrier look on his face and again put his finger to his mouth. Scott rolled his eyes and pointed to his ear and toward the house. Paul realized that there was some kind of music coming out of the place. A fiddle…

A rush of thoughts flew through his mind. Was it their guest from the Sunwapta Falls Resort? Could it be someone else playing an instrument? Paul came to one conclusion though; he'd never before come across a creature capable of playing music.

* * *

"Can you guys hear that?" asked Liv to the rest of them.

"Hear what?" asked Wes, nervously gripping the shotgun.

"I don't know, exactly. It sounds like some kind of music, coming from the house."

Wes listened intently to the air, but heard nothing. "Well, music isn't necessarily a bad thing."

* * *

Deacon was the first to get to a window. He pulled spider webs from his face and hands and cringed at the old fly and moth laden cobwebs clustered on the rough wooden siding of the house. The sound of a fiddle playing came clearly now from inside. As Deacon crouched beneath the window he realized it was an amazingly well-played rendition of "The Devil Went Down to Georgia". Every note was crisp and perfect and Deacon couldn't help but smile and enjoy the player's ability. He lifted his head slowly above the sill and looked into the cabin through the dirty glass pane. Inside, Joshua Siward played and danced on a kitchen table.

* * *

Paul leaned against the house beside the front door and listened to the fiddle play. Scott looked at him from behind a nearby tree and smiled with enjoyment. He recognized the song.

Paul opened the door to reveal Joshua frantically playing a fiddle on a small kitchen table. Sweat rolled down his face and he wore an expression of concentration as he danced. Salt and pepper eyebrows furrowed and his chin pressed hard against the instrument as he played. His black robe bounced and swayed about him and he appeared weightless, his feet hovered inches above the tabletop. Paul stared at him dumbfounded; he did not even realize that as he watched, Scott and Deacon moved in behind him. Joshua Siward's voice was clear and crisp as he sang:

"He played fire on the mountain, run boys, run!
The devil's in the house of the rising sun!
Chicken in a bread pan picken' out dough!
Granny does your dog bite? No, child, no!"

The man ripped his bow one final time across the strings and finished his song. He took a small bow, smiled at the boys, and spoke. "Rejoice, my friends, for the martyr has awoken, and the child may yet be born."

Joshua winked, and suddenly melted into a mist that poured down onto the kitchen table, spilled off the sides, and evaporated into the air.

Paul, Deacon, and Scott stood motionless with their mouths catching flies for some time after.

* * *

"We're not lying, okay, we seriously saw him!" said Scott, as he helped carry a load of supplies into the house.

"No, really…I believe you saw *something*," said Wes. "Liv even heard some music from back on the road...but…*Joshua*? 'The Devil Went Down to Georgia'? C'mon."

"Yes! Johnny and the Devil...run, boy, run! You should have seen him go!" said Scott, who was annoyed and would not stop trying to convince the rest of them of what they'd seen. Paul and Deacon had already given up.

"This all just keeps getting weirder and weirder," muttered Anna and she walked by, loaded down with a pile of blankets.

Anna always did her best to try and make herself comfortable in the houses they stumbled across but it was often difficult. It was a strange sensation for her to walk into what was once someone else's home. There were so many memories that built up over the years in a place like this, and while she never spoke of it to her companions, she could see them in her head. Cold Christmas mornings, drunken arguments, children playing, victories and defeats, lovemaking by the fireplace. She closed her eyes by the kitchen table and breathed in deep. More images, slowly becoming clearer, flooded her mind. A man coming home. A broken mirror. Waking from a nightmare soaked in sweat. A key in the side pocket of a coat. Blood. A table of marble in the basement.

"Anna."

There was no answer as she stared toward the fireplace.

"Hello! Earth to Anna!" called Jen. "Could you make some beds out of those sheets?"

"What? Uh...yeah, sorry."

Deacon and Paul, who had already checked the house for occupants, were now going through the closets and drawers as the rest of them unpacked. Jen prepared a small meal of deer meat and the last of the stale potato chips. They searched thoroughly but found no evidence of food in the house, likely very little had ever been stored in a home like this. The broken mirrors in the bathroom were an

indication the house was not free from its share of uninvited visitors in the last year but there were still some useful items left for those with a discerning eye. Paul located some old newspapers in the back of a kitchen drawer. Deacon found a package of shoelaces he gave to Wes who desperately needed new ones. As always there were pots, pans, and utensils, items that had become less useful as the food ran out. The only thing they found of any real value was an almost full box of large dinner candles hidden beneath the sink. On them was a strange note that read: ***Lite me!*** They decided to check out the cellar when Scott stopped them. He was always the first to check the refrigerator in the houses they looted, and he occasionally found a jar of pickles or condiments that were usually way past edible but still good enough for him. It wasn't, however, what was inside the fridge that interested him.

"Whoa, guys. Check this out," said Scott who pulled a magnet off of the fridge and gazed at it. He turned the others. "Oh, my God, look at these magnets. They've got all of our names!"

All seven of them crowded around the fridge and stared at it in wonder. They were Disney magnets, each with their own faded character wearing a big smile that read: **I Visited Disneyland!** Each tag contained their full names and six of them were accounted for, even Deacon, whose name had been made out of "Dean" and "Conrad" by scratching off the paint on some of the letters. The most disturbing part was that right there in the middle of them all was the name Ryan. Jen's name was conspicuously missing.

"*Eugh,*" said Liv quietly.

"I told you we saw Joshua here!" said Scott who felt vindicated. "We all introduced ourselves to him, right? Who else could have done this? And why did I get Goofy?"

"Geez, Scott, I wonder," said Paul with an eye roll. "These things look pretty old to me, like something out of the nineties."

"Check the back," said Deacon.

Scott grabbed it and read the back, "Made in China. *Surprise.* Here we are: Imported by Vesta Products. Los Angeles, California. 1997...weird, that's my birth year."

Each of them checked the back of their own magnet to discover the same.

A stunned silence followed.

This is really disturbing," commented Anna finally.

"Why aren't I there?" lamented Jen, but she received no reply.

Paul looked around the house again and his breath caught.

"Have you guys checked out the pictures in here?" said Paul. "Look at all this stuff!"

Paul walked over to an old oil painting of a dog he'd only glanced at when they entered. At first he barely noticed it; he thought it was another piece of dated cabin art, like a velvet painting of Elvis or dogs playing pool. When he looked closer he realized it was a dog identical to Lucky. Not identical. It *was* Lucky.

"Holy Christ—that's Lucky!" yelped Paul in surprise. The dog jumped up on her legs and yipped at the sound of her name shouted so loudly. "Look, her name is even stenciled in at the bottom of the frame!"

"Look at this, you guys!" exclaimed Anna from the other side of the living room, standing in front of a coffee table. All of them quickly converged around her. The table was covered in framed photos of children. It only took a moment for them to realize they were photos of themselves. Scott saw his youthful face, plump and wearing a dumb smirk. Paul saw a skinny young boy with heavy brown glasses and only a half smile. Liv saw her pretty face, a face too young to be wearing so much makeup. Anna saw the confident smile of her youth, confidence lost over the last year and a half. Deacon saw himself, a happy child who had not worn that kind of a smile for a long time. Jen only saw that there again was no picture of her on the table or anywhere else in the house. In the center of all six pictures sat a picture of Ryan, young and handsome. They could feel his confidence radiate from the frame. A lump appeared in their throats to see his face again, a face much younger than the one that they remembered, but the features were unmistakable.

The only item none of them seemed to recognize was a statue of a giant howling grey wolf that

sat on the mantle.

"Are we dreaming?" asked Wes quietly.

"I hope so," answered Deacon. "Because this is too much."

"How can this be?" asked Paul. "How can any of this be? It's not even misty in here, all of this stuff is real. I never met some of you guys until a year and a half ago."

"It gets weirder, guys," said Wes who walked away from the table. "All the pictures in here have something to do with us in one way or another. Look at this mountain, it's the one right above Sunwapta Falls….And look at this painting here…doesn't that look like the entrance to the tunnel? And here, don't tell me this isn't an exact copy of the Lincoln we drove in. Even that painting over there looks like the aurora we saw from Asimond."

They all examined each piece of artwork and agreed. It had gone light years beyond coincidence. There were also photos of the hotel in Hinton where the Fangs attacked them, a painting of a small cabin on a hill much like Sara and Ted Williams's, and statues of what looked like their horses.

"And look over here, at the painting on the cellar door," said Wes. "It's the head of the Giant Black we came across before Jasper. It's even got the broken antler. Stylized a bit, but I don't think you can deny it. And it looks old; it must've been painted there twenty years ago."

Many of them felt woozy from it all, and Scott and Liv both left the house to get fresh air on the porch. An even closer inspection of the home revealed more strange objects. A pen from the Home Hardware in Hinton. A pad of paper from William's Plumbing Supply in Edmonton. A photo in a silver frame of a very young Jessica Grainger climbing a tree. A small white toy semi. Even the wallpaper and couches in the house seemed familiar. In the end they all crowded around the cellar door. The head of the beast was faded and pointed upwards. Its horns took up most of the painting that was set in a perfect circle of black. It was almost logo-like. In small letters above the door were the words: ***open me!***

"Do we go down?" asked Liv.

"Nothing says that we have to," said Paul. His voice revealed that it was something he didn't want to do.

Deacon moved his hand to the metal handle of the door, almost expecting the painting to take a bite out of him. It creaked and turned easily but he quickly withdrew, his confidence lost.

"Well, it's open," he said, and took a deep breath.

"What do you suppose is down there?" asked Liv softly, relieved Deacon did not open the door.

"Treasure. Corpses. The cast of *Sienfeld.* Fucked if I know," said Scott.

"We're not going to leave without going down there…right?" Wes took a deep breath and did his best to hide his shaking hands. "So we might as well open it." He thrust his trembling hand onto the handle and flung back the thick wooden door. The rest of them couldn't help but jump back with Wes's sudden movement, afraid of what might fly out at them. Nothing did, and they all slowly moved forward to look at a staircase that curved endlessly downward into the mountain.

"My God, how far down does it go?" asked Deacon.

"At least a couple hundred feet right into the rock!" answered Scott.

"Should we—" began Wes, but he was quickly interrupted as Lucky ran through his legs and down into the shadowy depths.

"Lucky! Get back here!" yelled Wes into the stairwell, but all that answered him was his own echo.

Chapter 26 –Kick at the Darkness

Wesley David - Entry # 26.

Oh, what fun! We've found a strange cellar door that leads endlessly into a mountain in a small house in Banff. The place is filled with remnants of our past from fridge magnets with our names, to pictures of us as children. There are photos and paintings of every place we've been to in the last two years. Ryan's name and face are plastered all over, something that has caused me a great deal of uneasiness. It must be even creepier for Jen because everything about her seems to be missing. How all this stuff got here I can't even begin to explain. A feeling of deja-vu came over us as we looked around this place that was so strong I nearly threw up. I still have a feeling of giddiness that I can't seem to let go.

Are we in a dream? How could we not be? When am I going to wake up?

Maybe that's why I'm not afraid right now. I usually am. I don't know what kind of picture I've painted of myself in the last thirty or so journal entries, but if you've come to know me at all, I'm not often one to volunteer for anything dangerous. I usually would be the last to go down a seemingly endless black stairway to who knows where. Normally, I get left with the girls, to guard the base and watch the camp. It might seem like it's important to leave someone behind for protection but it's really not. We all know the girls can take care of themselves, and the real danger is in the houses we search, the buildings we go into, and at the bottom of dark staircases. The cellar door that covered the entrance was painted with a picture of a screaming Giant Black. I'll try to draw it if, and when, I get a chance. It's a vision I won't soon forget. I grabbed the cellar door and opened it. Even Deacon was afraid to, but I wasn't. I'm not afraid. I don't know if it's just today, or if something has changed (snapped?) in me but I'm going down there.

If this is all a dream then maybe when I die at the bottom of that staircase I will wake up, back in my bed on a warm Saturday morning. All of this will have been a terrible nightmare, caused by a

night of too much beer and some chicken wings that didn't sit right.

And if it's not a dream? Well then, maybe just in case, I should wish you a fond farewell, and a thank you for taking the time to read my little journal. I hope you enjoyed it.

* * *

"Jesus, how long does it take to gather torches?" asked Deacon as he nervously paced back and forth in the small living room. He, Paul, and Wes volunteered to go down the stairway and were now waiting for the girls and Scott to find and build them torches to light the darkness of the stairway depths. The ***Lite me!*** note on the candle box was yet another thing that went well beyond coincidence. The girls wrapped the candles with strips of excess bedding against the branches they collected. Once lit, the torches gave off a reasonable amount of light in the darkness, but nowhere near what a lantern would have.

"Hey, Paul, I bet it makes you wish we hadn't put our flashlights in the trunk, doesn't it," asked Deacon as he inspected his new torch.

"There've been a lot of things I wish I never put in that damn trunk…and some that I wish I had, like that fucking dog," muttered Paul as he peered down the seemingly endless stairwell.

"Would you guys just let it go, already? The stuff is gone, accept it," said Scott, tired of hearing them complain about it so much.

They lit the candles on the torches and brought handfuls with them for reserve. Paul took his rifle and Wes the new shotgun. Deacon was satisfied with bringing only his axe, leaving Scott and the girls with the one remaining rifle.

"Lucky!" yelled Paul into the darkness, but there was still no response. His voice echoed down the corridor and they listened hopefully for some response until it completely died away. They had become attached to the dog. She'd grown substantially since they picked her up and their fondness had

grown as well. Even Paul had to admit to himself he was worried.

Jen gave Deacon a kiss on the forehead and a long hug when they were ready. She was very worried. Anna and Liv sat together on the couch anxiously. Deacon looked directly at Liv as his head sat on Jen's shoulder. Liv gave him a tight smile and dropped her eyes to the floor.

"Have you got any feelings for us here, Anna?" asked Paul as they prepared to step past the threshold and into the darkness.

"The dog is still alive. I know that much. So be careful."

"We'll try," answered Paul.

"If we hear shots, what should we do?" asked Scott. "And how long should we give you before I have to come down there and save you?"

Paul shrugged his shoulders. "If you hear shots don't come down. If you hear screams…well, then maybe you can come to our rescue."

"That sounds wonderful. Be careful," replied Scott.

Paul nodded and took the first big step into the tunnel. Wes and Deacon followed, holding their torches up and wincing as the occasional bead of hot wax fell on their hands. Scott and Jen watched the three of them slowly disappear out of sight around the bend of the curving staircase. It was only a few minutes after they were completely gone from view that small wisps of mist crept into the house from the forest outside.

* * *

"Jesus. Look at this tunnel! Think about how much time it would have taken to dig this thing out. It's pure granite," said Deacon as he ran his fingers along the rock wall.

The light from their torches provided them with only a slight idea of the footing before them. Every now and then a candle would die out and they would have to relight it from one another's

torches. The cavern descended in a long and wide spiral that left them with no sense of direction. They carried on in silence as their candles steadily melted away.

"How far down do you think we are?" asked Deacon after a time.

"Be patient. China's only a few more minutes," answered Paul.

Wes watched and listened for any sign of Lucky. Here and there he found small paw prints on the dusty floor, but they were sporadic, and they only seemed to appear when he stopped to look for them. They checked the walls for writing or signs but found nothing but smooth rock.

"What are we gonna do if the corridor splits up?" asked Wes.

"Let's deal with that possibility when it comes," answered Paul, who turned back from speaking to Wes to see the path ahead of him was split perfectly in two. Almost as if on cue with Wes's comment.

"Holy shit. Is it just me, or did the corridor split up before my eyes?" asked Deacon.

"Wes…you've got to stop thinking so much," muttered Paul.

* * *

"Oh, my God, what do we do?" asked Liv, as the fingers of mist curled around her feet.

It made its way into the small house from everywhere. It flowed in through the crack beneath the door, the space between the windows, down through the chimney, even through breaks in the old wooden walls. The air behind the window made it look like some kind of a winter wonderland outside. The trees and bushes behind the thick fog became only a light green silhouette.

"Let's all sit down on the couch," said Scott, who flung the rifle over his shoulder. "At least we won't lose each other…and no bathroom breaks for a while."

They agreed and made their way to the couch as the mist continued to thicken in the living room of the house. They watched quietly for some time as it twisted and curled around them like

cigarette smoke in a still room.

"I hate the mist," said Scott.

"Really? *I can't understand why*," said Anna bitterly. "Is it the hallucinations, the voices, or just the monsters?"

"If you really want to know, it's the voices. Remember when I got lost that one time? When I was…well, you know the time. It was talking to me. It *knew* me…my weaknesses, my worries. It teased me, and…scared me pretty bad. I'm worried that awful voice will come back again."

"Do you think it was real?" asked Anna. "I hear voices sometimes too, and see things when the mist is heavy, but it's all in my head. Mostly, anyway."

"I don't know if it's real. Maybe it's only partly real. But that voice isn't *me*. I know that much. It's someone, or *something,* else. I know I've got some dark feelings and thoughts buried deep inside of me somewhere. We all do, I suppose. But I know myself. I don't have anything *that* evil in me."

"Who knows what we're capable of, Scott? Who knows?" asked Liv quietly.

They sat for a while in silence, steadily breathing the mist in and out.

* * *

"This could become a maze," said Wes, peering down the two corridors. Neither way looked either more disagreeable or more inviting.

"We should keep going to the right," said Deacon. "That way we can at least have our decision made for us if it splits up again."

They thought on it for a moment.

"If we keep going right, won't we end up going in a circle?" asked Paul.

"Well then, I guess the other option is going to the left," said Wes.

Suddenly, they heard a noise carry down the corridor. It sounded like a scream. Like a scream from one of the girls.

"Did you hear that? Was that Liv?" asked Deacon.

"But it couldn't be," said Wes. "It came from ahead of us." Even as Wes said it he began to wonder if they hadn't somehow been turned around. The paths ahead of them now seemed to be heading uphill. He was left with a sickening confusion. "Have we turned around? I'm starting to get a bit of vertigo down here."

"Let's just go on," said Paul, "ahead of us, to the right, like Deek suggested. Let's keep it simple and keep moving. Whatever that noise was, we'll find out eventually if it's ahead, or behind us."

Paul made his away down the corridor as Wes looked at Deacon and shrugged. They both followed.

* * *

"I'm starting to see things," said Liv. She tried to do what Anna usually did, keeping her eyes shut tight, but her curiosity eventually got the best of her.

"What do you see?" asked Scott who seemed to be mesmerized himself.

"That picture. You know the one on the door. The Giant Black. It turned its head and looked down at me, I'll swear it."

"Pfft! That's nothing," responded Scott. "Although now that you mention it…you know the Hamburgler from those old McDonald's ads?"

"Oh, you've got to be kidding," groaned Jen.

"No, seriously. I saw him walk across the room with a plateful of burgers. Facemask, cape, the whole meal-deal, so to speak…except he looked a little angrier than what I remember. Anyway, he

stopped and looked at me for a minute and then brought his finger to his lips and motioned me to be quiet, and made his way down into the cellar. Scared me a little…but those hamburgers looked pretty good."

"Even your hallucinations are about food," sighed Jen.

* * *

"So which one—or ones—of us aren't gonna make it?" asked Wes as they hiked down the descending corridor. It grew warmer in the tunnel, and they stopped for a rest.

"What are you talking about?" asked Paul.

"You know. How Sara Williams said not all of us are going to make it past the hotel."

"Oh. I guess you would first have to believe she's even right, and not crazy. But if I have to guess, I would put my money on Scott," said Paul without thinking. "He'll probably have to make some life and death decision between his ass and a donut, and he'll choose the donut."

Both Deacon and Wes laughed.

"And you, Deek?" asked Wes.

"This is kind of a sick conversation, don't ya think?" responded Deacon. "I don't know…I guess, because I have to, I would pick Anna, mostly because she can be so…Anna-like…at times. But I suppose it could be any of us, including me. Sometimes you can't avoid bad luck…or fate."

Deacon's comment quieted the conversation for a time and they continued in silence. As they journeyed on they came to more splits in the path, at times dividing into two, other times into three or four, different passages, but each time Paul led them down the farthest right without a second thought. The rock went on and on, never changing in features or texture.

"We've got to be halfway down the mountain," said Paul. "We should be careful we don't go so far that we won't have candle light for the trip back. Feeling our way back through the darkness

doesn't sound like fun to me."

Suddenly a strong breeze blew through the corridor. It steadily picked up and began to blow harder and harder.

"Quickly! Cover your torches!" yelled Paul.

They all tried their best to cover the flames, but only Deacon had enough size to properly shield his candles. Paul and Wes stared at him in the growing darkness as both of their torches were already extinguished.

"Keep it going, Deek!" pleaded Paul, but it was too late. The wind continued to intensify until only one lit candle remained. Deacon covered it with his hands and body, giving no thought to the burns on his palms, but it began to die as the oxygen was used up, forcing him to open his cupped hands. It blew out as soon as he let the air in. He watched the smoke coil as the wick slowly turned from a light yellow, to a deep orange, to pitch black.

They were left alone in the complete darkness of the tunnel. Around them the breeze slowly died away leaving them in a quiet black gloom. Curses quickly took the place of silence.

"Why didn't we bring the lighter?" asked Wes as he peered into the blackness around him.

"Because how the hell could ten separate candles go out, all at once, down here?" answered Paul from somewhere nearby. "And how the hell could there be wind in a tunnel like this? And because I didn't think to bring the goddamn thing."

They began to notice the sounds of the tunnel as vision no longer played a role. Creaking could be heard, and what they thought were distant voices or whispers.

"Can you hear that?" asked Deacon, whose voice sounded panicked and breathless.

They both could.

* * *

"What are they doing down there?" asked Jen. "How far down could it go?"

"At least they aren't in this soup," said Liv.

They watched as the mist around the cellar door flowed thickly out of the doorway.

"Wow, it must go deep, look at the air bellow out of the door," said Scott.

The wind continued to rush, so strongly that it cleared the mist right out the house. In time it gained so much strength their hair began to toss and flip on their heads.

"Oh no!" said Liv. "How are their candles going to stay lit in this?"

"No big deal, they can re-light them. See, it's already starting to slow down," assured Scott.

"How are they going to re-light them without this?" asked Liv, her Zippo outstretched in her hand.

* * *

"Don't panic, we can still get out of here," said Paul with some confidence in his voice. "We stuck to the right side all the way down here…so if we stick to the…left…wall the whole way back we should be fine."

They could hear each other breathing in the heat of the tunnel.

"But what if *it's* down here Paul?" asked Deacon with terror in his voice. His heart thundered in his chest. He didn't like the dark, he didn't like enclosed spaces, he didn't like the spiders and insects that had to be down there with them, but he especially didn't like what he saw in the mist earlier that afternoon.

"If *what's* down here?"

"You know. *It*. From the Rocky Mountain Goods shop….*It*...with the hood," said Deacon. "The man in the mist," he whispered.

A chill ran down Paul's back at the thought. But that was one more thing for them to be afraid

of. Really, *anything* could be down there with them.

"Relax, Deek. Just relax," said Paul in Deacon's direction. "Look, how the hell could it have gotten down here without passing by us? Besides, that door has been closed shut for years…and think about all the cobwebs we've passed through. If anything came down here, how could they still be strung across the path?"

"Right. That's right, Paul," agreed Deacon after thinking for a moment. His voice seemed to relax even as he said it.

Paul stood up with some difficulty in the darkness. He turned around quickly when the breeze first began and he was now completely disoriented. He reached to his left to where the wall should have been but found only empty space. His eyes were fully open but he could see nothing but blackness. He took another step to the left and still his hand found no wall. Another full step, and again, but found only empty space.

"Can you guys find the wall?" asked Paul.

Deacon reached to the right and found nothing, "Weird, it was beside me a minute ago."

"I've got nothing over here," said Wes who also stood up and reached out in front of himself. "The wall was just here…where could it—" *Smash!*

"Wes!"

"Deek?"

"Fuck!"

Crash!

"Ow!"

"Paul!"

It took some time for them to get a grip on themselves and realize that they were not under attack or in imminent danger. Wes had taken a tumble in the darkness.

"Are you okay, Wes?" asked Deacon.

"Yeah, yeah. I think I ran into a pile of stuff, and I cut my hand… I can taste blood. I tripped over a big pile of something and it ain't soft... it feels like…like a lantern. I swear I can smell kerosene too."

"A lantern?" asked Paul. "Well that's the perfect thing to find in the middle of the dark with no lighter. Are there any solar powered flashlights over there?"

"Naw. I can feel jars, too. I think that's what broke. Can you guys smell that? It smells like… like strawberry jam."

"I found a wall!" said Deacon who did not sound like he'd moved very far away. "It doesn't feel like rock though. I think it's wood. There's a wooden wall over here."

"Where are we?" asked Paul.

* * *

"We've got to go down after them!" said Scott. "Can you imagine what it would be like to be down there with no light? After what happened this afternoon?"

"But Deek said only come down if we hear screams," said Liv.

Almost on queue a scream, clearly from Wes, echoed up the corridor into the room around them.

* * *

A guttural growl came out of the darkness.

"What the hell was that?" asked Wes who struggled to stand up.

"It sounded like a growl!" said Deacon from across the room.

"My God, Paul, what if they're down here with us?" asked Deacon as the fear he fought so

hard to keep down came bubbling back up with a vengeance. "What do we do if there are Creepers down here? Jesus! We might shoot each other! We might—" Deacon was suddenly interrupted by a tongue licking his face. He reached around and embraced the warm fur of the dog.

"It's okay, guys," said Deacon, almost in tears. "It's okay. It's Lucky."

* * *

Scott lifted the candle in front of his face, looked down the rocky corridor and stepped inside. He and Jen agreed to try to go down and find them, and do what they could to help. Jen carried two more candles behind him.

"It was a terrible idea in the first place," said Liv from behind them. "We have got to stop going into places where our common sense is screaming at us not to. The cellar door's got a damn monster on it; did we need more of a warning?"

"What's common sense?" asked Scott with a smile. His foot landed on what looked like rock, but it sounded strange. "Hey, Jen, take a look at this."

* * *

"I think I can see something," said Paul.

"What!" yelled Deacon from across the black room.

"I don't know. It kind of looks like a tiny little piece of sunlight. I don't know if I can reach it."

"Come to mention it," said Wes, "I think I can see it too. And now that my eyes are adjusting, I can almost make out some shapes. There shouldn't be any light whatsoever down here."

"I found something too!" said Deacon. "It's a…I think it's…." Deacon ran his hand over and around the strange object he found hanging on the wall.

"What! What is it?" asked Paul.

"A garden trowel. I think it's a garden trowel."

"What the hell would that be doing down here?" asked Paul who reached up toward the small piece of light. He grabbed what felt like a piece of tape and pulled. Light flooded the room and pierced their eyes. He removed a large piece of duct taped cardboard away from a small basement window. When their eyes adjusted they found themselves on the dirty floor of a typical everyday cellar. Even from the meager light of the dirty basement window they could see they were surrounded by a thick mist.

"What the hell have you guys been doing down here?" asked Scott who stood on the top of a short curved stairway with a lighter in one hand and a rifle in the other. From behind him light flowed in from the open cellar door above, and they could suddenly see the daylight of the room behind them. The three girls stood behind Scott with bemused smiles on their faces.

Deacon, Wes, and Paul sat in different corners of the room. Deacon had a garden trowel in one hand, and a pair of tree clippers in another. His mouth stood open as he looked up the stairs that were right above his head. Wes lay across a stack of jars filled with all sorts of different pickled and canned preserves, some of them busted open beneath him. Behind him were shelves stocked with all kinds of useful goods. Paul stood with a piece of old duct tape in one hand and his eyes opened wide. His agape mouth mimicked Deacon's.

"For heaven's sakes, it's been at least an hour!" barked Jen from the top of the stairs. "And it's misty out there. What's been going on down here?" Lucky yipped at the sound of her voice and ran up the stairs to greet her.

"We must have walked for at least an hour," said Paul, half to himself. "My legs are stiff from it. How could this be?"

"It was all an illusion," said Deacon.

"I don't see any illusion," said Scott, "I just see three idiots covered in jam, who didn't think to

bring a lighter with them into a basement."

As their eyes adjusted to the pale light they saw a large white marble table that had no business being down in the grimy old cellar. A small white envelope sat conspicuously on it, with words scrawled across the front: ***Read me!***

Chapter 26 – The Letter

Wesley David - Entry # 26

I've clipped a strange letter we found down in the cellar of the house to this entry...

My name is Richard Empire.

In 1977 my ex-wife Mary and I stayed in room 733 of the Banff Springs Hotel, and since then, I have not had a single good night's rest. If you have this note in your hands, and you are the intended recipients, then I may be able to finally find the sleep that has eluded me for decades.

It was a cold March night.

I remember that it snowed heavily that week and the skiing was excellent. Mary and I were celebrating our 5th anniversary. We did not have very much money in those days, but with no children we had just enough to spare to take a ski trip together. The hotel was expensive, even back then, and the room was first class, if a bit small. That night I had my share of rye, something I have since given up.

I awoke some time late. I'll never forget the way the night looked out of the large window in the suite, a light purple, with the stars shining through a sky filled with green ribbons of the northern lights. It was the time before dawn when the night has lost its strength to fight off the day. The room was filled to the ceiling with a mist. It was almost like a smoke of some kind, and I can still remember breathing it in and out.

A man appeared to me out of that mist, older and distinguished, with a beard and a fiddle. At first I thought I was dreaming, or hallucinating, but there he stood in the center of the room looking at me as my wife slept. His feet didn't seem to touch the floor, a detail that frightened me. He spoke:

"Hello, Mr. Empire. I have a task for you."

I asked him who he was and what kind of hippy drugs he was on, but the man only smiled and

spoke in a tone that quieted me quickly.

"I have chosen you to be my herald. I don't know if it is luck or fate that brought you into this room, but you are chosen. I have looked into your dreams and I see that you are a good man, a man of integrity and principle. It drains me to come here, so you must listen carefully. Follow your dreams. I will speak to you through them, they are my the only means of communication with your world, and this time period."

I was astounded and afraid. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I looked to my wife but she continued to sleep peacefully, paying no mind to the volume of his impressive voice. I'm not a religious man, I went to church as a child and lost interest after I was no longer forced to go, but when I realized I was at least half awake, I could not help but ask him if he was an angel or a devil.

"Perhaps both, Mr. Empire," was his reply. "But we need each other. Your dreams will show you the way."

Before my eyes, he disappeared into the strange mist and I fell back asleep shortly after he was gone. I should have gotten up immediately and complained to the manager, or checked the door to see how he got in, or to see if anyone was still in the room, but instead, unbelievably, I laid my head back on the pillow and closed my eyes.

That night I had a nightmare unlike anything I had ever before experienced. I cannot imagine that any man, be it a soldier who has seen terrible death up close, a man wracked with guilt from a dark secret, or even a madman, could experience a nightmare of the same intensity and horror.

A man named Joshua Siward showed me the end of the world. I saw rifts opening above cities, tearing open the sky and dumping the filth of some kind of hell onto mankind. Women, men, and children were torn apart, ravaged by beasts of such evil and wickedness as to make the minions of hell jealous. Society fell. People starved. Mankind fought and killed both the creatures and themselves as darkness spread across civilization

Humanity struggled through horrible diseases, war, and hopelessness. False prophets turned

faith into death. And he made me experience it all. I will not recall all of the images I saw that night, the emotions in my heart or the physical torture and pain I experienced. Every pang of hunger, every torn limb, every cankerous boil, every broken heart, and shattered mind. I experienced this over what seemed to be an eternity. Just as I felt the final stroke, the last of humanity being destroyed, he came back to me in my dream and spoke.

"This is why you must follow me. This is why you must obey your dreams. This is what you must help me prevent. For your world, and my own."

And I awoke.

It took me weeks to recover. My wife later told me that the entire mattress was soaked in my sweat and I had to be restrained that morning and taken to the hotel infirmary. I was transferred to the hospital and drugged for days until I was finally able to calm down. The doctors thought that it was the booze, the therapist thought it was repressed memories from a difficult childhood, but none of them had ever seen a nightmare have such a profound and physical effect on a person. But it was still only a bad dream they said. But I knew. I knew it was real.

Weeks passed, and my life returned to a semblance of normalcy. I experienced no dreams for a time but I never doubted, not even for a single moment, that they would return. And they did. He sent me messages in the form of dreams and these dreams have continued for almost forty years. Every morning I awake in sweat to the vision of a huge black antlered creature screaming, with mountains rising behind it and flowers at its feet. The sound echoes through my ears even as I get to my feet. I have never gotten used to it, the fear of that beast is a motivation I can't ignore.

My very first dream showed me a young man struggling to find a job. His name was Henry Jacobs. Yes, Deacon, your father. He was considering moving his young family back east because of his inability to support his family. Joshua Siward made it clear to me he must find a job here; that he must stay in Alberta. That he must have a third child. A boy.

Deacon. The Strength. Tall and proud. A good man. I've come to know you so well. Better than

you know yourself, and I helped to find your father find that job.

Wesley. The Healer. Although you might not believe that yet. So much will depend on you. My dreams brought me to your family and showed me your struggle for acceptance. Remember how the house fire kept you from you going to Disneyland? Things would have gone poorly on that trip for you. You can still walk, and your sister is still alive because of the fire that delayed your vacation.

Ryan. The Martyr. The son I was never able to have. So much like everything I wanted to be as a young man. Remember the neighbour that called the police when you were drunk and going to drive to your brother's graduation? The old man that cost you your license and your youth. The old man that ruined your high school experience. That man was me, my boy. How it broke my heart. But that phone call stopped you from killing two young girls. And it will stop you from being in jail when the nightmare arrives.

Liv. The Vision. A beauty unlike any that I have seen before. You needed little guidance but much protection, and I saw you many times as you grew up. I watched your soccer games, your dance recitals. I was the father you did not have. I only wish I could have revealed myself to you.

Anna. The Mother. So much like the woman I married. If only you can find the courage to use your gift to its full potential, there is no end to the benefit that it could bring your fellowship.

Paul. The Champion. You have a passion and vitality that both amazes and scares me. If anyone can do Joshua Siward's bidding it is you. None of the others have had even half as much attention as I have given you. You are the product of my tireless work, and my greatest pride.

Scott. The Hope. There was no one else I wanted to meet more. That I wanted to come face to face with, and befriend. We played pool together on a hot August night at the Broken Crown Pub. My hands shook from excitement at meeting one of you in the flesh.

The dreams persist. Sometimes they give me a clear goal. Sometimes they are of people, lands, and events beyond my recognition. Sometimes they show me nothing more than insights into the seven of you. My dreams had me threatening bullies when you were young, sending you fliers and books

about hunting and nature camps. I left magazines and letters on your doorsteps, bought you cabs when you were drunk, and I stopped a man from raping Liv, before he even knew that he would. I have written messages in bathroom stalls in Jasper, unlocked doors in Utah, pried open skylights, hidden supplies, and placed strange objects in even stranger places for reasons I cannot understand. I have even revisited the hotel where I experienced the nightmare. I will not even begin to describe the years of helping your parents and the uncountable times I have performed tasks in places you cannot even begin to imagine for which I have absolutely no understanding as to why I performed them.

So if you are now reading this letter, my work has succeeded.

The upstairs of the house was decorated with enough surprising material to pique your curiosity to venture into the cellar. The basement is filled with useful items for your journey that I have collected. Who else but you would find anything out of the ordinary about the pictures and my collections up there? I apologize if you were lost for too long in the snare I set in the stairwell. My dreams have taught me some useful skills—but I had full confidence you would find your way through it. (I couldn't have just anyone finding their way down here, now could I?)

I considered not writing you a note. Just leaving this house and its contents as a mystery for you, but I have come to know you all too well for that. You already have too many questions that have no answers. We all deserve some answers.

I have gotten old somehow, and my years of tireless work have rewarded me with cancer. My nightmares, and my duty to them, cost me my marriage within a year of that awful night in the hotel. My friends and family have abandoned me as insane. The life I had only begun to build was taken away from me because of one night in room 733. I will likely not make The Arrival, as the doctors say my cancer has spread to my blood. I wished so badly to meet you all, here, but perhaps it is a good thing. The Arrival is a nightmare I do not want to experience...again. But I have always believed it has all been for something bigger and better than myself. That my sacrifice was not in vain. That I am not crazy. No matter what they say.

Go to room 733 and find answers we all deserve.

You are my children. Make me proud.

Sincerely,

Richard Empire

P.S.

Do not fear the passage to the worlds beyond, your destiny, and all of our futures, lie there.

* * *

They each took a moment to read the note and pass it on. No one said a word until all seven of them read it. When Anna finally finished, no one spoke. Some of them exchanged glances while the rest stared into space. Finally, Paul cleared his throat.

"Let's check out what's down here and see what he's left us. There'll be plenty of time tonight to discuss the note, and what it all means. I think I need some time to soak it in, anyway."

Everyone nodded in silent agreement and moved on to search the cramped cellar. It was only the distraction of the new food and supplies that kept their minds from dwelling on the letter. Richard Empire had been very good to them. Not only were there the clothes they so desperately needed, but they were sized perfectly for each of them, except Jen, who looked lost in a shirt that had likely been left for Ryan's large frame. There were durable blue jeans and warm jackets and even new hiking boots sized to their feet. A chest left under the stairs contained flashlights and unopened packs of batteries. There were hunting knives, axes, and fishing gear, new tents and backpacks, water bottles and food containers. Liv screamed with joy at the discovery of a carton of her favorite cigarettes. She tore them open and had one fully lit in her mouth in seconds. The basement was also loaded with all kinds of different food. Jars of pickled and preserved fruits and vegetables, bags of vacuum dried nuts and candy, salt and spices, tins of soup and pasta, coffee and sugar. There were even full bottles of rye

and gin. Richard Empire left little notes on the different items that were intended specifically for one of them. A jacket, or shirt, noting it was their favorite colour, or just like the one they wore in high school.

"Holy crap, guys, check this out!" exclaimed Scott. Beneath the stairs he found a small chest with three handguns and many boxes full of ammunition. A small note on the guns said only, "For protection."

They couldn't help themselves from diving into the food immediately. Nuts and chocolate bars passed around the room as they erupted in cheers at every new find. Liv and Anna compared clothing while Jen sat silent and nearly in tears seeing if anything left for Ryan might fit her. The boys admired the guns, tools, and backpacks they found. It was like Christmas morning three months early with the sound of laugher and packages torn open and tossed about. It ended much as Christmas would, with the seven of them strewn about, asleep on the basement floor, with bellies full and heads resting on piles of new clothes. They napped in peace, feeling fully protected by the illusion in the stairway.

* * *

Paul ran his fingers across the cold metal of the pistol in his hands as he rested lazily on the cool concrete floor of the cellar. He thought about how much he'd always wanted a pistol. He remembered the magazines and websites he was interested in. It started with a magazine subscription that mysteriously came to his house every month for two years. A mystery now solved. How many things in his life could be explained by this strange man? Was he really the person he was supposed to be, or the creation of some nutcase and his dreams? He felt violated in a way, but at the same time thankful. As he rested on a thick new winter jacket and ate another pickle, he realized he felt mostly thankful.

* * *

Deacon pulled out the cigarette he'd been saving for Liv and crushed it between his fingers, letting the dry tobacco crumble into the dark corner of the room with disappointment. *What was I thinking, anyway? What would Jen have thought? Besides, I would have had to get Liv alone to give it to her and that might not have been a good idea.* Deacon thought wistfully back to their kiss at the waterfall and let out a deep sigh. Even the thought of it brought prickles to his skin and queasiness to his stomach. His mind told him it was for the best, but his heart felt crushed like the dry cigarette on the cold concrete floor.

* * *

Jen closed her eyes and tried to sleep but it eluded her. Why was she not a part of this? Where were her name and her picture? Why was she such a mystery?

And why were Deacon and Live staring at each other like that?

* * *

Liv sucked on her second cigarette and smiled as the nicotine coursed through her veins. She would have to be careful with these. There was no sense smoking them all in a week (as much as she might like to.) She knew she would have to ration them, like everything else these days, and she did the math in her head. Liv leaned over to see Deacon staring darkly into the corner of the room. He looked at her and she smiled while blowing a puff of smoke out of her mouth. He had been much quieter with her since the waterfall. He spoke to her and looked at her so little now that Liv worried that Jen might start to suspect something because he was so obviously avoiding her. *And so what if she*

did? He wouldn't have kissed me in the first place if she was doing her job. Liv looked over at Jen to see that she was already staring right back at her. Liv faked a smile and blew out another puff of smoke.

* * *

Wes couldn't get the letter out of his mind as he struggled to sleep. After reading the note twice as many times as the others, he placed it in his notebook for safekeeping. It was difficult to accept that he'd had a guardian angel his whole life. It was a shock to think some strange old man started the barbeque fire that kept him from going to Disneyland as a child. What would have happened down there? The plane didn't crash. There were no earthquakes or disasters. How could the old man have known? Why did he pick the seven of them? Why was Ryan dead if this was all so perfectly planned? As always, Wes had only questions without answers…and in what way was Wesely David a healer?

* * *

Anna had visions of Richard Empire spending time in this cabin. He was a good person but not perfect. She could see him screaming at his wife, trying to convince her his dreams were important and that she had to help him. She could see the man only months later, placing his mouth over the end of a shotgun barrel with tears streaming down his face, too scared and too proud to pull the trigger. She could see him waking up in the night, his face canvas white with terror, too horrified to even scream. Anna shook her head and tried to rest but it was no use. This house was too saturated with emotion. She pulled the large sweater around herself and thought of Ryan. The young man that died trying to save her family. She knew very little of him besides that he was loved by the rest of the group

and that she would never fill his shoes. They were devastated after his death, but she was grieving so deeply for her own family she didn't notice. She didn't know if she belonged with them, but she would try to take her place, if they would let her. As she tried to sleep the image of a massive black wolf looking at her through the trees would not leave her mind.

* * *

Scott decided he would not let the note bother him. It was interesting to think he actually played a game of pool against the odd man who wrote it. He searched his memory but couldn't remember the game, or the man. Likely he'd had one or several too many that night. He wondered if he had won and taken the man's money. Hopefully not, after all the guy claimed to have done for them. Even if what the man claimed was a lie, the stash he left them down in the basement was more than enough to earn their gratitude. The rest of the group was dumbfounded by the note but Scott felt that it was no stranger than Joshua Siward dancing on a table, or the monsters and mist they were dealing with on a daily basis. *No sense worrying about what you can't change,* thought Scott as he tossed back a large handful of trail mix. *A bit stale, but not too bad.*

* * *

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They decided to spend the night down in the cellar. The decorations upstairs still made many of them uneasy, and they were protected by the illusion in the stairway. Deacon went back upstairs to gather some of their things and when he looked down the stairway it again appeared to be a never-ending passageway into the rock, but the illusion melted away once he stepped back in it. It was an effective trap and it made them feel secure. There was so much food down in the basement that they ate beyond their heart's content. Scott shoveled food until he moaned with discomfort. There was far

more than they could ever carry, and they would likely have to abandon half of it if they hoped to travel soon.

The basement was heavy with the mist and it combined with the smoke of Liv's cigarettes to form a wet smog. She smoked so many that she found herself with a serious bout of nausea. She looked pale in the dusky light from outside that flooded into the basement from the small window.

"Liv, you look terrible," said Paul.

"Too much, too soon," she said hoarsely as she lay with her back to the cold floor.

"Don't you find it creepy that you've been stalked by a strange old man your entire lives?" asked Jen, she still sounded on the verge of tears.

"Yeah, it's definitely creepy," agreed Paul. "But in a weird way it's also comforting. I mean, it's obvious the guy meant well, right?"

"My God…where am I in this?" Jen burst out. "Why aren't I a part of it all?" Tears started falling down her cheeks. Deacon moved to comfort her, but she pushed him away.

They sat quietly for a time, thinking about the letter and its meaning. Wes quietly reread the note and passed it off to Anna when he was finished. Outside the wind blew as dusk turned to night. The trees rustled and the cellar door occasionally bounced on its hinges.

"So what are we going to do?" asked Deacon to anyone that would answer.

"Digest," moaned Scott, who sounded even sicker than Liv.

"I think our course is pretty clear," said Wes.

Paul cursed quietly under his breath. "I don't know about all this. I'm not a damned hero, you guys. I'm not *destined* to do anything more than to try and survive."

"Amen to that," agreed Jen.

"We can't just ignore all that's been happening to us. There's no denying it, this is for real," replied Deacon.

"I agree that it's for real," said Paul, "but how do we know we can trust what we've seen and

heard. Half the time everything we think we see is an illusion. How do we know we're not being tricked? How do we know the hotel isn't going to be infested and we walk right into some trap?"

"I don't know...it seems to me like that would be a pretty elaborate trick. It would have been a lot easier to just fill this basement with Creepers if they knew we were coming here and be done with it," said Deacon.

"I suppose. I never wanted to be burdened with something like this. I just wanted to go to the coast. I want to have a life again," said Paul, "I'm not a hero."

"You never know, Paul. You're braver than you give yourself credit for, maybe there is some hero in you…deep down," said Anna with an honest tone, something she seldom used when speaking to Paul.

"Thanks, I guess," said Paul.

"There's no reason we *have* to go there. We are free to decide," said Jen.

"Oh, c'mon! There's no decision to make! We're going to the hotel," muttered Scott without even looking up. His stomach put him in no mood to listen to any more of the conversation. "We all know it. I mean, really: are we going to drive by it and wonder about it for the rest of our probably short lives? We might as well get some rest, and quit bitching about the situation, and deal with it. Christ! Y'all sound like a bunch of pussies."

It was the first time in a while that Scott brought a smile to their faces, and this time he was not even trying. Even Liv sat up from her nicotine-induced stupor and grinned.

"Okay, then," said Paul who also couldn't wipe the smile from his face. "I guess it's decided. Thanks, Scott. You're a real motivator. What is it? Our 'hope'?" Paul quirked a brow at the others.

"You're bloody welcome," said Scott without even looking up.

* * *

Even with the protection of the illusion and their newfound weaponry, most of them slept poorly. The floor of the concrete cellar was cold and hard even with the mounds of bedding that they brought down with them. The next morning Paul was up loading food and supplies back into the truck before the light of day even crested the mountains. It was a crisp morning, and frost tipped the grass and trees surrounding the house. A natural fog floated in the air around the house that made the cold morning seem even quieter.

"Jesus, Paul, you're up early, even for you," said Deacon quietly as he walked toward a group of trees to relieve himself.

"Couldn't sleep," said Paul, just loud enough for Deacon to hear. Mornings were always a quiet time for them, at least until Scott awoke.

"Got something on your mind?" asked Deacon as he went.

"I don't know where to begin," said Paul who quietly laughed to himself. "You worried about the hotel, Deek?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. But no more than I was going through the tunnel, or searching a house for the first time. What's bothering you? C'mon, spill it, Mr. Dean, I can tell something's up."

"It's the hotel. I guess it kind of feels like the end of the journey. Sara said not all of us will go beyond it, and Anna says we *need* to go there. She's been pretty on the spot lately with that shit. It seems like we're getting close to the end."

"Yeah, maybe we are, but you don't know for sure it will be the end for all of us, or any of us," replied Deacon.

"I suppose you're right, but it will be some kind of an end. You know, when I was a kid I used to shut off my favorite movies before they ended. I also used to stop a great book before reading the last chapter. I just didn't want them to end. I guess I didn't want to face that moment after it was all over. To me it's…loneliness. You know, the six of you, you've become my family. I don't want to

lose that. I've lost enough family in my time, even before the world went to hell." Paul looked up now at Deacon as he spoke and then quickly changed the subject. "I mean think about it, it's been a year and a half. Can you believe that? What haven't we seen together, Deek? Who would've ever thought….Think about all the shit we've gone through."

Deacon couldn't help but laugh lightly along with Paul before speaking. "They say that every end is a new beginning. Maybe it will all be for the best."

"I suppose." Paul licked his lips lightly and found the courage to ask what he wanted. "If it happens…theoretically speaking, of course, if there's a passage…at the hotel…would you go in?"

Deacon turned and looked Paul in the eyes. "If it came to it… and I was meant to… you better believe I would."

Paul smiled. The respect and friendship between the two of them had grown over the last few months, and their struggle over leading the group after Ryan's death came to an end with no real winner, just an unspoken mutual agreement to do all they could, when they were able.

"Thanks, Deek," said Paul, offering an outstretched hand. Deacon took it and pulled Paul in for a full hug. They embraced, and both gave a few solid slaps on the back before separating.

"Thank you, too," said Deacon quietly as he walked through the cold mist back into the house.

* * *

The day warmed up enough to melt the frost from the ground and burn off the morning haze. All that remained was an almost undetectable mist that could only be seen when looking at the mountains in the distance. Deacon and Paul spent the morning together loading supplies into the truck and were already finished when the rest of the group awoke. Scott was again the last to get up, and he carried his bad mood over from the night before. They were worried. The hotel had been on their minds and they knew that today they would finally reach it. They loaded as much of the food and gear

out of the house and into the truck as they could. What they couldn't get into the truck they left on the floor of the cellar.

"Does everyone have what they need?" asked Paul.

They all nodded.

"Okay then, we're off."

They watched the small house slowly shrink away as Paul backed down the long driveway. As they passed by the sign that greeted them, they saw the numbers 733 painted in large red lettering on the back.

"You see that, guys?" asked Scott pointing at the numbering. Everyone in the group nodded and watched it as they drove by.

* * *

Anna suddenly had a flash of a large white door in her mind, a vision so strong it blocked out the trees and mountains that surrounded her. The gold numbers on the door burned into her head. 733. She saw the door in its entirety. The handle slowly turned and strange blue light began to escape, and as it inched open four long black fingers reached around and pulled the door in farther. Mist billowed out of the opening and fell onto the floor. The door continued to open, and she began to see the source of the light, the edge of a rectangular floating mirror with rounded corners.

* * *

"Anna, are you okay?" asked Wes.

"Um…yeah. It's nothing," answered Anna.

"It's okay, Anna, it is a bit misty out," said Wes.

"Believe me, I know," she answered.

* * *

The Banff Springs Hotel was built high up on the mountainside to ensure the most majestic of views. Paul stopped before the narrow road leading up to the hotel. The spires of the green copper roofs of the massive structure could be seen from the roadway, and it brought butterflies to his stomach.

"Well…we're here," said Paul quietly. "Put your weapons out of sight for now, we're not trying to storm the place. Anna, do you have any feelings?"

Anna lifted her head up and opened her eyes. "If we go down that road there might be no turning back."

"Is that a feeling or your intuition?" asked Wes.

"Both."

Paul sat for a while letting the truck idle in front of the entrance and then spoke. "If anyone doesn't want to go, this is your last chance to get off the crazy train."

They sat quietly for a moment and said nothing. Scott suddenly stood up in the back and jumped off onto the asphalt below. Everyone looked at each other uncomfortably. Scott walked, without comment, away from the truck to the nearby highway ditch and proceeded to urinate. When he finished, and walked back to the truck, he was met with six angry glares.

"What? What! I had to go," he said with a smile he couldn't hide.

They drove down the curvy road toward the hotel. The forest around them was thick with pine trees and seemed dark and old. They were met first by a beautifully carved wooden sign welcoming them to the hotel. A hundred feet beyond it a huge parking lot opened up out of the trees to reveal the majesty and grandeur of the resort.

The hotel soared before them. Its pointed peaks pierced the sky in an impressive attempt to

emulate the spires of the nearby mountains. The hotel was a fortified wall of brown and grey brick topped with green copper roofs. It looked very much like a medieval castle from Europe and they all couldn't help but feel like they'd been transported back through time when looking at it. Countless windows, many of them blocked with wood, dotted the sides and juts of the building and rose right to the roof. The eves and angles of the building were intricate and seemingly endless, a quality seldom seen in more modern buildings. The seven of them couldn't help but stare and be both impressed and humbled by the massive structure.

They were quickly brought out of their stupor by the sound of a shotgun blast.

Chapter 27 – Cowboys in the Mist

Wesley David - Entry # 27

I promised to draw the picture on the cellar door back at Richard Empire's house. I've found some time, so here it is, to the best of my ability:

* * *

They ducked as the sound of another shotgun blast echoed over the roof of the truck.

"What kind of reception is this supposed to be?" asked Deacon.

"Definitely not what I expected," said Paul. "I'm scared to drive any closer. The next shot might be through the windshield."

"Somebody's got to walk up there and talk to them," said Jen. No one replied, but it seemed to all of them like the only sensible thing to do.

After a short moment of silence Deacon pulled the rifle from his shoulder and moved to jump from the back of the truck.

"No way, Deacon!" said Jen. "Not you. Not this time." She gave him a steely look.

Wes felt the load fall on him. He took a deep breath and without a word handed Lucky over to Scott and jumped off the side of the truck with his arms raised.

"C'mon, Jen!" barked Deacon. "Listen, Wes, you don't have to—"

"It's okay, Deek, it's not your turn," interrupted Paul from the driver's seat. "Wes is a good sport, and as good of a representative as we're going get."

"What should I say when I get there?" asked Wes.

"Try to find out why they're shooting at us first," said Deacon. "Then see if you can find a way to get us in."

"And don't tell them too much. Nothing about room 733, or the note, or the house, or any of it. We're just seven travelers with a truck full of food looking for a nice place to stay. Tell them Sergeant Walbeck sent us," added Paul.

"Maybe try to bribe them with some of the stuff we've got," said Liv.

"And make sure the hotel takes dogs," added Scott with Lucky draped in his arms. The dog was aggravated from the sound of the shotgun and squirmed uncomfortably.

"Find out if they have running water," said Anna.

"And ask if the pool still works," said Jen.

"Ooh, I'd love a spa day," giggled Liv. "See if they have package deals!"

"C'mon, guys! Jesus," said Wes. "Why don't I just try to not get killed and we can ask the rest of the questions later?"

Wes's arms were tired by the time he got to the far end of the parking lot from having them raised above his head. The sun was right in his eyes, and he struggled to see the people on the roof and in the windows of the hotel. As he approached, three men walked out to greet him. Wes stopped and brought his arms down. The men continued to approach until they were almost face to face.

"Hello. My name's Wes, and we've come here to talk with someone…whoa, guys...whoa!"

Abruptly, the largest of the three men unexpectedly tackled Wes to the ground. Wes fell easily, struggling only to protect his now almost healed arm.

"What the fuck are you doing!" he yelled.

"Shut up, asshole," said the lead man who savagely pulled Wes's arm behind him. Wes protested again, but was answered with a stiff boot to his chest. Another kick found his face and stars exploded in his head. Wes heard a gunshot blast suddenly hit one of the hotel windows above him.

The rest of the group, witnessing the beating from the truck, could do little as a barrage of bullets fired back.

"You're coming with us!" said an older man. "And you're going to explain to me what the hell you and your friends are doing driving *our* truck, and you're going to tell us where Cory and Trent are."

"What? Who? I can explain!" said Wes struggling to get up while still trying to protect his arm.

"And it better be what we want to hear," said the third man as he kicked Wes in the stomach.

* * *

Watching Wes get tackled was surreal. It took a moment for them to react to the sight of Wes on the ground being kicked.

"What the hell!" yelled Deacon.

"What are they doing to him?" shrieked Liv. "His arm is hurt! Why are they doing that?"

Paul stepped out of the driver's side and aimed his scope at an empty window above the entrance and fired. He might have tried to go for one of the three men attacking Wes, but the struggle was too chaotic, and Paul could not guarantee he wouldn't hit his own friend.

The reaction to Paul's shot was instantaneous, as multiple shots answered his own. One bullet landed near his feet sending clumps of hot asphalt into his face, another blew off the side view mirror, and a third whizzed above Scott. The shots were well aimed, and came close to hitting their mark. Deacon was unfazed and aimed his rifle at the hotel.

"Paul! I got a clear shot here. Some asshole that's reloading four stories up in a widow. Do I take it?"

"No!" said Paul, hopping back into the driver's seat. "Wes is as good as dead if we do that! We're not gonna win this one out in the open. Hold on!"

Paul jammed the truck into reverse. The tires squealed, sending smoke up into the haze already surrounding them.

"We can't leave him, Paul!" cried Jen.

"We have no choice."

* * *

Wes had been clawed, punched, and bitten many times in the last year and a half, but the kick he received to the stomach before being dragged into the hotel was by far the most awful. The blow was such a surprise that Wes had not braced himself at all. No muscles flexed, no held breath, just the

perfect kick into the solar plexus. He was not even able to take in a breath until he was well inside the hotel. He wheezed and moaned uncontrollably as he was dragged inside, and was on the verge of losing consciousness. The people lining the hallways of the hotel stared at him with hatred and suspicion as he passed. His nearly healed wounds split open from the force of the attack. The pain was so great that all he could see were dim watery shapes around him from the tears in his eyes. He could feel his arm wet with his own blood. He could also feel warm blood trickling down his neck from his bleeding nostrils. Suddenly, he felt himself being struck and kicked again, this time with less force.

"You bastard!" screamed a young woman's voice. "You killed him! You killed my Cory!"

More shapes emerged out of the watery dimness and they pulled her back as she continued to wail. All Wes could feel was the pain in his arm and the sweet feeling of oxygen returning to his lungs. He realized, for the moment at least, that he was not going to pass out.

"Go easy on that arm, Grimmon. The kid's bleeding badly," said a short man that followed them in. "We don't want him dead before he can give us answers."

The lead man grunted. "Always the humanitarian, aren't ya, Bill?"

The man released his grip on the wounded arm and a shot of pain roared into Wes's mind. He squeaked an almost inhuman sound, a sound that Scott would have laughed profusely at under different circumstances. Wes felt his other arm pulled up behind him and he was marched through the hotel into a large open area. They thrust him down on a small chair and he felt himself being tied to it.

"Don't tie the arm!" pleaded Wes. "Please…I need bandages."

"Answers first," said the man, pulling the rope taut.

* * *

For a moment Paul thought he might flip the truck as his three point turn quickly became a skidding two point turn. He drove furiously down the mountain road leading back into Banff. As they

escaped they could hear bullets whiz by them into the trees. When Paul reached the bottom of the hill he spun the truck around and it stalled with a clunk. All they could hear was the clicking of the hot engine. They were not pursued.

"We can't leave him there," said Jen.

"I know," said Paul, his hands squeezed tightly around the steering wheel.

"Well, what are we gonna do!" continued Jen frantically. "We can't just abandon Wes up there!"

"I KNOW!"

* * *

"What's your name?" asked the man.

"Wesley. My name is Wesley David. I need bandages, I'm bleeding…please."

"Wesley. Why are you and your friends driving our truck?" asked the voice, but he was interrupted before he could finish.

"Ask him where Cory is!" screamed the girl's voice.

"And Trent," said more voices in agreement.

"Jackie, shut your mouth, and get a hold of yourself! That goes for all of you, or I'll take him to the back offices," said the man in such a commanding tone Wes recognized him as the authority. He continued. "Where did you get the truck?"

"We were picked up by a young man. He...he was dressed like a cowboy." Wes could barely breathe through his nose and he blew out a mash of blood and snot onto himself to free up the passage. His arms were tied so tightly he could do little more than let it sit there on his lips and chin.

"Go on."

"He drove fast…and blasted the music. I…I don't know exactly what he said because I was in

the back. Except he wasn't a human. It was a Grey Man."

"A what? What's a Grey Man?"

"A creature. They look like us except…grey and four fingered. Christ. The mist messes up your mind, and it makes you see exactly what it wants you to...listen, sir, I need bandages!"

The shorter man, Bill, spoke. "Dana, try to find the boy some bandages for his arm."

The interrogator, and leader, who Wes now knew was named Grimmon, gave the short man an angry look and asked, "So what did you do to this boy in the cowboy hat?"

"He was driving the truck…we shot him…I mean we shot *it*," there was a sudden gasp in the surrounding crowd. "After we killed the creature we found a body in the back of the truck. It was a young man with cowboy boots. We buried him about twenty kilometers out of Banff."

A sob echoed through the lobby and Wes could hear footsteps running frantically away.

"Was there another body? One with a black baseball hat and tattoos?" asked Bill whose voice was filled with desperation. "Or did you shoot him, too?"

"There was no black hat, no tattoos, and no other body. Christ. We don't kill *people*. Why would we do that? We were told to come here by the Sergeant. By Sergeant Walbeck, Adam Walbeck."

There was a silence for a time. Wes sensed they knew him, or at least of him, so he continued. "He told us to come here. He told us that there were *good* people here. He told us that we might be able to build a life here."

Only silence met him. Grimmon pointed up to a few of the onlookers in the surrounding balcony and motioned for them to come down. He huddled with them and together they spoke for a while in whispers. Grimmon left the huddle and returned to look Wes right in the face.

"Do you believe Isack is our Lord and Savior? Do you believe that he has come to save us and deliver us to the promise land?"

Wes searched his mind for an answer. The Sergeant had no love for Isack but he could not

remember what kind of place the hotel was supposed to be. He would be in even deeper trouble if Asimond was in the crowd and the people here were a group of his zealots. If he answered wrong he was as good as dead. Wes looked up and surveyed the room around him for some kind of sign, for some religious pictures, writings, or clothing but he could see little with the tears in his eyes.

"Quit looking around and answer me boy," said the man.

"No," said Wes quietly.

"What! What did you say?" asked the man.

"I SAID NO! We don't believe in any of that bullshit, we never have and never will. You and Isack can both go fuck yourselves!"

* * *

"Okay, everyone calm down," said Deacon. "Let's think this out before doing something too rash."

Jen was on the verge of hyperventilating.

"Okay, okay, calm down, Jen. Now what can we do? Do we have any options?" continued Deacon.

"Well," said Scott. "We could drive back there and throttle the truck through the parking lot. Hope we avoid the twenty plus rifles firing at us, and crash through the front doors. We jump out, SWAT style, waste everyone in our path, and save him."

"This isn't a time for your stupid jokes, Scott," muttered Liv.

"It's not a joke; can you think of another way to get him out of there? I mean *really*, is one of us going to try the unarmed approach again and have them beat the shit out of us and drag us inside kicking and screaming too? We can't sneak in there."

The total hopelessness of the situation hit them.

* * *

"Well, kid, at least you've answered one question right," said Grimmon. "Now drop the bullshit and admit you and your friends killed the two boys."

"We haven't killed anyone!" shouted Wes. His anger bubbled to the surface. The image of Jessica Grainger suddenly jumped into his mind and he realized he lied. It only helped to make his anger swell. His arm no longer hurt, the pain was dulled into the background. Fear and rage coursed through his veins. "I came here in peace…with my arms raised above me. And you attacked me. Where is your honour? Where is your respect?"

"Where is my son!" screamed the man whose voice rose so loud that it cracked in mid sentence. Wes could see his fists clenched and hatred in his eyes. "Where is my son?"

Wes looked up at the man through the sweaty hair that clung to his bloody and bruised face. "He's dead."

* * *

"We can wait for nightfall," said Liv quietly. "Maybe if it's misty we can sneak inside."

"We can try to bribe him out of there," said Jen, "offer some weapons and food to get him back."

Paul let out a deep breath. This wasn't right. Everything pointed them directly to this hotel. He was excited to see what was inside; he wanted to meet the people who lived there. How could this have happened? Things were going so well, pieces were falling into place. A picture began to form in the huge jigsaw puzzle of their lives, the pieces had been turned over, and the outer edge was almost complete.

"Maybe Scott's suggestion is the best. We load the guns, hop in the truck, and drive directly at

the hotel as fast as we can. It would be the last thing they would expect. We'll catch them off their guard at least. We might even make it inside. If we do, maybe we can grab one of their people, and use them to negotiate. At least he won't die in there alone," said Paul. "I don't know about you guys, but those kicks didn't seem like they were going to ease up when they got him inside. Don't forget that wound on his arm. He stopped bitching about it lately but it's not fully healed."

"I don't understand why," said Scott. "What did we do to them to deserve this?"

* * *

Wes and Grimmon stared at each other in hateful silence. Wes was afraid to let his eyes down from the man, although he wanted to terribly. A quiet moment passed in which Wes was sure the man was going to strike him. The moment passed and he could see the pain and anger in the man's face slowly disintegrate into sorrow. His jaw muscles relaxed, his shoulders sagged and he was the one to look away from Wes to the ground.

"Cory," moaned Grimmon under his breath.

"I'm sorry," said Wes.

The man turned and walked away. Wes watched him leave as the tears in his eyes finally cleared enough for him to see his sulking body disappear around a corner. He now realized an audience surrounded him. They all looked at him some with faces of anger, some with curiosity, and a few even with pity.

"Dana," said Wes.

No one replied.

"Which one of you is Dana?" he asked again.

A tall dark haired girl stepped forward. Her brown eyes were among the few that showed pity.

"Bandages. I need my arm cleaned and dressed," said Wes. He was beginning to feel dizzy.

"Or you're gonna have a dead body to deal with. And someone here has to go out there and get my friends…someone's got to let them know I'm okay…or they're gonna do something stupid." Wes started to laugh. He didn't even know why. "If it was Deacon in here I know we would do something stupid to get *him* back. Christ, even Anna." He giggled as he sat, still tied to the chair and drenched in blood, snot, and sweat surrounded by an audience of strangers.

"They're probably gonna do something really, really…really stupid."

* * *

"You know what, Paul?" said Deacon. "Screw it. You're right. Let's go. The plan is simple, and it's our only option…are you in, Scott?"

"You know it, man," he replied.

"You guys are going to get us all killed," said Liv.

"If that's what it takes," replied Deacon. "*We leave no one*. Isn't that what you said?"

"What? When?" asked Liv.

"When I was running from the Giant Black, back past Hinton."

Liv blushed. Anna looked down ashamed as the memory of the incident came back to her as well.

"Wes told me all about it," said Deacon holding Liv's eyes. "You guys almost got yourselves killed for me. I'll do the same in return. Our luck can't hold out much longer, anyway. Sara told me we wouldn't all go beyond this hotel. Well, I say we do all that we can to make sure that at least Wes does."

"You're right, Deek," agreed Paul with steel in his voice. "We left Ryan in that house. We left Jessica on that road. I won't…I can't…ever leave anyone behind again."

Around them the mist collected in the trees.

* * *

Bill stared at the young man tied to the chair before him, his face covered in blood and laughing quietly to himself. He didn't seem like a killer. Bill knew in his heart this skinny young man and his friends did not kill the boys.

"Someone untie this kid and get him some water," said Bill, finally breaking down. He was also distraught at the news that Trent and Cory were dead, but he would grieve later. Their death was a fear haunting him more and more every day they did not return, and the news was unfortunate, but not unexpected. With the amount of craziness in the outside world it was ignorant of them to think this young group of kids were their killers. Truck or no truck. Not that much time had gone by since The Arrival, and people were, for the most part, still people. He told them all the truth, a truth they didn't want to accept, and in return they took out two weeks' of frustration and anxiety on him.

"We should be ashamed of ourselves," muttered Bill to himself. "Dana, untie him! You heard me!"

The girl proceeded to undo the rope around Wes. He gasped as the blood and feeling returned to his arm.

"What about Grimmon?" said one of the voices in the background.

"Grimmon's going to need some time. He will have to come to grips over Cory. So until then, I call the shots," said Bill loudly. "Mike and Mike, you two idiots get out there and find this young man's friends. He says they're gonna do something stupid. You find them, talk to them, and make sure they don't."

Both of the Mikes nodded and quickly ran outside without a word of disagreement. Back in the chair, Wes's giddy laughter turned to tears.

* * *

Along the road a cool layer of mist formed, twisting and turning in spirals as they drove through it, like blowing snow on a wintry highway. Only the girls could hear Lucky whining at their feet, the rest of them only heard the wind in their ears.

The girls were given the pistols and Deacon and Paul carried the rifles aimed over the truck's roof. The girls argued with the idea, but when the decision was made, they refused to be left behind. The truck emerged from the forested road into the parking lot of the hotel that again loomed in front of them. Scott did not let off the gas.

Halfway to the hotel Paul saw the first of the two young men waving at him. He wore a large brown cowboy hat with a big silver buckle. His feet were hidden in mist and the young man seemed to float. Paul thought he could hear him yelling, "Stop." The others saw the young man as well, but Scott continued to press on. The image of the cowboy in the mist reminded Paul of the first driver of the truck, the smiling young man who transformed before his eyes into that hideous creature.

They nearly hit the second of the two young men, whose arms also waved frantically. He too wore a large cowboy hat, along with a brown vest and jean shirt. Still Scott pressed the truck toward the front of the hotel. It grew larger and more ominous as they approached, and Paul could see silhouettes in the windows preparing to fire. Again, all of them wore cowboy hats. It was at that instant that it clicked for Paul.

And not a moment too soon.

The cowboy. The body. The truck. They were from this hotel. The beating now seemed almost justifiable.

"Oh, Jesus Christ…Stop! Scott! Stop! Stop!" he yelled with all his might through the broken back window. A window that Paul later realized saved their lives because it had been smashed.

The tires screeched loud enough that the sound bounced off the hotel and back down into the valley. By the time the truck came to a stop, Paul found himself half in the front seat and half outside. Deacon's rifle flew from his hands from the sudden force and bounced dangerously on the asphalt in

front of them without going off.

Paul pushed himself off Scott and stumbled out of the truck and dropped his rifle. He could feel the guns being pointed at his back from the windows above. The two young men continued to wave and yell as they ran toward him. Paul blinked and wiped his eyes when he realized neither of them wore a cowboy hat, or any cowboy style clothing at all. Another illusion.

At his feet the mist swirled.

* * *

Chapter 28 – Lady of the Night

Wesley David - Entry # 28

One of the things I miss the most since our travels began is privacy. To finally have a moment alone to myself, to breathe, hidden behind these thick walls is nothing short of divine. The only thing that outdoes my newfound privacy is the sheer bliss of a daily bath.

It's been over a week since I last updated my journal. I haven't found the time here at the Banff Springs Hotel. Since being well enough, I've helped in the gardens, manned guns at the doors, patrolled the area, gone hunting and fishing, and been generally busy meeting new people and learning the ways, and the many rules, of the hotel. Everyone in the group has taken to this place after what I can only describe as a very difficult introduction. We have "donated" our food, bedding, rifles and most of our general supplies to become part of the community that lives here. The only thing we didn't have to hand over were the hand guns. The hotel generally will not take in wanderers, unless their dowry, or abilities, are sufficient. Apparently ours was, thanks to the haul that we found in Richard Empire's basement. Perhaps he provided us with so many supplies for the very reason of giving us access to the hotel. The only one of us that Grimmon, the hotel's leader, was excited to take in was Lucky. Apparently he has a fondness for dogs, and she has already worked as many guard shifts as the rest of us combined. She's become a local celebrity.

At first it was difficult to make friends because of a lingering mistrust that Bill, one of the hotel's leaders (and the only real friend I have made so far) has tried hard to dispel. We now know the truck that we pulled up in was from this hotel—a truck that was carrying two very popular and important people. One of them, Cory Grimmon, was the son of Grimmon (I don't know his first name, but that's what everyone calls him). The other young man's name was Trent, another person that carried a lot of weight in this place. We nearly got ourselves killed, myself especially. I took a beating at the hands of these men before things got sorted out. Occasionally my head still gets dizzy, but my wounds are healing well and to be honest I'm feeling pretty good here.

We haven't even tried to get into room 733 yet, attempting to first gain acceptance among the one hundred people or so that call this hotel home. Grimmon also has total control of all of the room keys, a fact we learned early, and he guards them like the rooms are filled with treasure. I can already see that the room, and Richard Empire's note, have gone to the back of our minds. The girls are busy doing chores and jobs and have begun to make friends. Paul's already leading hunting trips, and Scott's already made more friends, and pissed off more people, than the rest of us combined. Deacon seems to be in good spirits too, although he has seemed a little distant. He's the only one of us who has gone to the door of room 733. It's a good life here, at least so far, especially compared to what we have gone through.

The hotel has only been attacked once since we got here. A small group of Fangs smelled the humanity and attacked late at night. I'm told it's not an uncommon occurrence. They were killed before they came within a hundred feet of the hotel. The security here has allowed me to sleep again. Really sleep—in a comfortable bed, behind a locked door without the worry of being torn apart.

But the fear is still there. Always there.

* * *

Deacon was breathing hard when he finally crested the top of the stairs of the seventh floor, but he was not sure if the cause was his nerves or his lungs. The stairwell was well lit from the windows at each landing that let in the midday light. The corridor was far darker however, with only one window lighting each end. The gloom only increased as he walked toward the room. 733.

Paul warned him against going so soon. He argued that if Deacon were caught he would need to have some sort of explanation for being there. The group earned little trust at their first meeting, being allowed to stay at the hotel only because of the abundance of supplies they brought with them. This mistrust eased a little over the last week, as they came to know more and more people, but they

still had not yet earned the trust of Grimmon, an acceptance Deacon came to doubt they would ever win.

Deacon could smell dust and age as he walked by old paintings, light fixtures, and large intricately carved wooden doors. The elaborate carpeting stretched out before him, but he could make out little of the pattern in the gloom. A memory of *The Shining* came into his mind, and he imagined two young twin girls in blue dresses suddenly standing in front of him. The thought made his already pumping adrenaline gush in his stomach. Nothing appeared in the hallway as he walked, however, and he was thankful the last few days had been clear with only a light mist forming at night. When he finally reached the doorway a sense of fulfillment came over him. He stared at the lettering in triumph. He made it. They all made it. Ever since Sara Williams whispered the words *Seven Thirty Three* into his ear, he had thought about this room, and now the three golden letters stood out in front of him. Inviting him inside. Her cryptic words came back to his mind, words he hadn't yet shared with anyone:

... and the hotel will call to you, and you will go to it, but not all of you will go beyond.

Deacon reached his hand to the knob and felt the cold steel. Slowly he turned it.

The room seven-thirty-three is locked to you. You must never enter that room, Deacon.

It was locked. Deacon laughed lightly to himself. It was just like she said it would be.

Beware the feast, for The Departure will happen on that terrible evening.

Deacon stepped back and felt a lump form in the back of his throat.

...but you must instead take your love to Utah. The man behind the curtain awaits, and the child must be born.

He knew it would soon be goodbye.

* * *

"That's that, Marty, three of a kind beats two pair," laughed Scott as he pulled the large pile of

peanuts toward himself with a smile. Moans erupted from the guys sitting around the table as he showed his cards.

"Man alive, yer a lucky fuck," said Marty as he threw his cards into the pile so hard an explosion of the nuts went flying off the table.

"Now, now. No splashing the pot, didn't you say earlier that's the house rules…like my dear old Dad used to say: if you can't afford to lose, don't gamble," said Scott who tossed a large pile of the salted nuts into his mouth and crunched away happily. He continued on with a mouth full of half chewed nuts. "We brought you all of these snacks anyway; I'm just winning back what was already ours."

"There is no *ours* here," said Grimmon, who came into the room from out of nowhere. "You will have to learn that if you want to stay."

Scott tossed another handful of the nuts into his mouth and wryly smiled. "Well then, help yourself, *me casa es su casa*." Scott waved his hand invitingly over the pile of peanuts.

Grimmon turned and stalked away. Scott and the rest of the guys at the table watched him leave without so much as a word. They were not impressed with the disrespect that Scott showed the man.

"A piece of advice, Scott," said Bill, who had long before lost his peanut ration to the others but stayed to watch the game play out. "You've got to show him respect or you won't be here long. A place like this only works with rules and hierarchy; without them we won't make it through another winter."

"But the guy has been a complete asshole to the seven of us," said Scott.

"Maybe so, but he is still in charge. Don't forget that," said Bill.

Scott brought another handful of nuts to his mouth.

"There are a lot of things about Grimmon that I know Wes won't forget."

* * *

Anna struggled to capture a midday nap alone in her new room. She hadn't slept well since coming to the hotel. In fact, she couldn't even remember the last time she had a good night's rest. Jen and Liv talked constantly about the beauty of having their own room, a warm comfortable bed, and the wonderful sleep. Even the guys seemed to be in good spirits with their new home, but not Anna. There were too many memories in a place like this. Too many different feelings and images to try to decipher. In her room the image of people coming and going filled her head. There had been a suicide attempt in this room. The image of a hand holding a razor and shaking in the bathtub came into her mind. The feelings and emotions of a couple making love for the first time, a husband cheating on his wife, a wife cheating on her husband. Salesmen, doctors, lawyers, children. But it was not the images from the room the filled her head. Something was coming. She could feel it. Something terrible.

Anna rolled onto her side and tried to focus her mind back on the memories from the room instead.

* * *

During their wandering, Jen had hated doing dishes at camp. It was such a stereotypical chore for the girls to perform, not that she would have preferred gathering wood in the forest or setting up the tents. Washing dishes here at the hotel was different though. She wanted to contribute, and she was willing to do whatever she could to see that they were allowed to stay. Besides, some of the men at the hotel helped with the cooking and cleaning without complaint. She couldn't help but notice some of them look at her. Deacon had been so distant lately; no doubt the stress of arriving at the hotel and the strange letter had got to him. They shared the same room, alone together at last, but he had not made love to her even once. She knew Deacon had some feelings for Liv. All of the guys did. But it was nothing more than a simple crush. Any man would have a crush after being around a beauty like that

for a year and a half. These new surroundings would change that; it wouldn't be long until Liv found someone here at the hotel. She had already captured the interested glances of the men and jealous comments of the women.

She would change things with Deacon. She loved him, and he was one of the only things she had left in her life that made any sense. Her family, her school, her job, and her church were gone. Deacon was her anchor. An anchor that held her to sanity. An anchor that held onto her heart. An anchor that kept her ship from moving on.

* * *

Paul slithered through the wet grass and dirt toward the large caribou grazing quietly in the distance. The animals in the park had not been afraid of humans at one time, protected for years by a strict hunting ban. But they adapted quickly, learning to avoid all contact with people and the many other predators roaming about. The animal looked up at the sound of a twig that broke beneath him. Paul looked across at Luc, a young man from Quebec who had worked in the park for many years before The Arrival. He was apparently an amazing skier, a completely useless skill in these times. Luc motioned to him to freeze, and gave the hand movement that the animal was moving to the left. Paul set his rifle to the ground and put his eye to the scope. The caribou slowly walked right into his aim and set itself in the perfect position in the crosshairs for a kill shot. Paul couldn't help but feel sorry for the animal, so unknowingly putting itself into death's grasp. He stopped his breathing, seized the moment, and pulled the trigger. The animal fell.

The blast echoed through the valley, telling anyone listening that whatever group Paul Dean was in, he would contribute.

* * *

Liv lit another cigarette and leaned back in the plush hotel chair. She inhaled and blew the smoke into the center of the room and watched it slowly dissipate in the still air, reminding her so much of the mist that dogged them over the past year and a half. She promised herself she would take it easy on the cigarettes, a commodity she simply refused to part with to gain entry to the hotel, but like any addiction, it was only an empty promise. Grimmon had asked for them, but agreed it was something that would only cause grief among the patrons, as he liked to call them, and he knew they would not last long to cause any trouble. It was for that reason, and perhaps one of her smiles, that he allowed her to keep them, so long as she promised to keep them hidden and be careful when smoking them in the hotel.

Liv rubbed her tired hands. She'd hauled water all morning long. It was not an enjoyable chore like gardening in the large green plots throughout the old golf course, but it was still far better than cleaning the latrines, something Paul, Deacon, and Scott had been performing on a daily basis, being on the bottom of the male seniority list.

She thought of the water she hauled and her mind again returned to the waterfall. Liv had kissed many boys in her day. She thought at first it was only a bit of a stunt, a harmless kiss to satiate her lingering curiosity, but all it did was give her a taste for more. But she couldn't. She loved Jen; she had been her friend and companion for a long time. How could she steal from her friend?

But why should she not have what she wanted? She'd gone without for a year and a half, and she was empty. *Alone for a year and a half.* Through the darkest times in all of their young lives with no one to hold onto. She had no one to cry to, no one to put her arms around through the cold nights. Wasn't all fair in love and war?

They shared something together, something she wanted to explore. Being back in some kind of a routine, with time to breathe, and time to think, she found her mind wander to him again and again. Where was he in the hotel? What was he doing? They had been together every day for a year and half,

and while she didn't share his bed, they were constant companions and friends. She only got to see him once a day in this new place. Once a day wasn't enough.

Liv reached for another cigarette.

* * *

They agreed to meet in Paul's room every night after dinner. It would be easy to lose sight of one another in a place this big, and with this many people, if they didn't make an effort to stay together. Life was busy again. Night time was no longer spent staring at the stars in silence or talking about the family members or Netflix shows that they missed. At the hotel there were strict guard duties and obligations. If you were late, you were yelled at; if repeated, you would have to report to Grimmon; recurring or excessive mistakes, or poor performance, could result in a missed meal, unwanted chores, and even expulsion. Scott asked Bill if anyone had ever been expelled from the hotel, to which he'd nodded yes. The punishments were more than enough to quicken one's step and it left little time for them to meet together.

"Have you guys heard about the bride?" asked Scott after they'd all sat down and caught up with each other.

"I heard something about it," said Deacon. "Sounds like a ghost story to me."

"A ghost story?" said Wes, interest piqued. "What are you talking about?"

Paul and the girls were also intrigued. The old hotel was a creepy place at times but thankfully the mist had been light since their arrival, and it showed little of itself to them.

"Well, Cindy, that's Mat's girlfriend, you know—the short guy with the temper when you're on guard."

They knew instantly of whom he spoke.

"Does she have red hair?" asked Liv.

"It's kind of red I guess. I always remember red hair as red, when girls used to dye it bright. Anyway, yeah, red, kind of hot too, I guess, if that's what you're into. She's got…you know, big…" Scott moved his hands to his chest and made cups.

They again knew instantly of whom he spoke.

"I was talking to her this morning about it. I guess it works best if you're standing on the landing of the seventh floor west stairwell."

They looked uncomfortably at each other. The west stairwell was a forbidden area.

"Yeah, I know, I thought that too. But she says on nights when it gets misty if you stand at the bottom of the stairway on the seventh floor you can see the ghost of this bride that died when she fell down the stairs on the way to her wedding ceremony a long time ago. There's also supposed to be a phantom bellhop too, but seeing him is luck of the draw."

"It's a trick of the mist," said Deacon.

"No, that's what I said at first, but Cindy said that it's not, or else, it's far more than that. I guess that she's been here since before The Arrival, she was here before Grimmon—who she said was a cop here in Banff, I didn't know if you knew that—anyway, I guess there's been a legend at this hotel about this bride since the early 1900s. The bellhop too. It's the infamous ghost stories all of these old buildings have."

"Bullshit, all I've ever seen in the mist was a figment of my own imagination, or someone else's. It's an urban legend that has perpetuated itself into a repeated hallucination of the mist," said Paul, confident with his diagnosis.

"Maybe so, pal, maybe so, but Cindy says everyone who has gone there has seen the exact same thing, right down to describing the patterns of her dress. There's talk, and maybe you heard this before the TV news stopped, that the mist does more than make you just hallucinate. They said it actually amplifies the supernatural. Maybe its just people's imaginations bringing the dead or old stories to life, but Cindy says that there are even people like Deacon here, people who don't see things

even when the mist is thick, that have gone there and seen the spectre…and she says it's terrifying."

There was a long uncomfortable pause and they looked around at each other.

"Jesus Christ, what is this? *Scooby Doo*?" asked Paul, to which everyone started to laugh.

"I certainly know who Scrappy is," said Deacon, laughing at Scott.

"I vant to suck your blud, Vaah!" said Wes with his best vampire imitation.

"Yeah, yeah…you can laugh all you want, but the next misty night you guys can come with me to that stairwell and we can all check it out. We'll see if you laugh then," said Scott indignantly.

"And I suppose we will have to be there at the stroke of midnight," said Liv.

Scott looked at her and shrugged his shoulders, nodding yes.

"Oh, you're kidding me, what is this now, *Cinderella*?" asked Paul, comtinuing to laugh.

"Look, I didn't make up the story, Paul, I'm just telling ya what I heard. Creepy bride at the west landing of the seventh floor stairwell. Misty nights only. Stroke of midnight."

"I suppose it velps vhen it's a vull moon, vaah!" continued Wes.

"Actually," said Scott under his breath, "it is supposed to help."

They all exploded in laughter.

"You guys wait. I'm coming to all of your doors on the next misty night and I'll knock until you come out. You won't be laughing then, at least from what Cindy said."

"Wokay Waggy," said Paul in his best Scooby Doo imitation.

The laughter continued well after Scott slammed the door shut behind him.

* * *

It took a couple of days for Scott to stop pretending he was mad at the group after their meeting. Scott knew the bride on the stairwell wasn't a joke, at least not after he heard the story described to him by a few other people. Cindy was not the only one to told him about the bride, and

every person he asked either gave him a cold expression or warned him against going there. As Scott persisted he learned many of the people of the hotel intentionally avoided the stairwell and the seventh floor as much as they could, especially on misty days. There were some people who'd been so spooked by it that they avoided the stairwell entirely. Cindy said there was even one girl who was so scared by what she witnessed she simply refused to take lookout shifts on the top floor balconies, opting to clean potatoes and wash dishes on the main floor instead. Scott wondered what Deacon had seen on the seventh floor when he visited the room. Likely nothing, as it was a clear day. But he still wondered.

* * *

The mist became as thick as white mud three nights later and it completely changed the hotel's atmosphere. It came in with the wind, slowly penetrating the depths of the building. Their accustomed routines changed immensely. No one was allowed to perform a duty alone, from dishwashers to guards. All the gardening and hunting duties were suspended, leaving a large group of agitated people to play cards and board games in the scant midday light of the main foyer. A few of the people who were known to be very susceptible to the mist kept to their rooms, having the day's two meals delivered right to their quarters. Even as they sat and talked or read, a person would occasionally stand up and scream, or ask if anyone else saw what they did. It was unnerving, but at the same time relieving to see that their group was not the only one affected by the mist.

Everyone at the hotel was asked to spend the nights in their rooms, that is, if they were not on a double shifted guard duty, but Scott decided that he was not going to obey the order. They had all laughed at his story about the bride and it was time to collect. He knocked on Paul's door first. It took a moment for him to answer and look through the door's peep hole at Scott's grinning face. Paul opened up the door with an angry sigh and yanked him inside and quickly out of sight.

"Jesus, Scott, what are you doing?" whispered Paul angrily.

"It's misty…it's almost midnight…it's ghost time," said Scott with a smile.

"What?" asked Paul.

"You know. *Wokay Waggy,* put your shoes on and let's get the others."

"Are you serious?"

"Very serious, pal. If it's all just a big joke like you say, than I guess you've got nothing to be afraid of. And you can all laugh at what an idiot I am when we don't see anything up there. Right?"

It was a challenge, and Paul heard it clearly. It took some time for the cobwebs to clear from his head after waking up, but he knew that sooner or later, Scott would force him to go up there and see what everyone in the hotel continually whispered about. After Scott told him a few days earlier, Paul asked a few of the people around the hotel about the bride and the seventh floor stairwell, and most gave him a far more serious look than he expected. A majority of the replies were simply to avoid it, but the few details he could sneak out of people did seem a little disturbing. Paul had seen his share of disturbing before, and while he would not admit it to Scott, his curiosity was piqued as well. It was getting to be time for them to check out room 733. If they didn't soon, it would make its way into the background of their thoughts. This would be the perfect excuse to go up there—if they were caught by Grimmon or Bill, they could claim to be curious about all the rumors.

"Okay then, big guy, lead on," said Paul with a wave of his hand.

Most of the group's response to Scott's invitation mimicked Paul's initial reaction. Anger at being woken up, and a little bit of fear at the thought of actually going up there. Paul had not been the only one to make enquiries about the seventh floor. The rest of the group received the same troubled warnings when they asked about it. Curiosity was perhaps the reason that only Liv showed any real resistance. They came to her door last for that very reason.

"Are you guys serious?" asked Liv. "We'll be in shit if we get caught, you know." Cigarette smoke bellowed out of her room making it appear even mistier inside than it already was. The smell

was strong on her breath.

"Jesus, Liv, how much are you smoking?" asked Wes who'd wrapped himself in a small blanket.

"Only a few a day, *thank you very much,* and I just finished one before you got here, okay?" she snipped.

"Alright, alright, I was only asking 'cause it stinks in there."

"Maybe *you* stink, Wes," said Liv.

"Are you coming or not?" asked Scott in the same tone that he used on Paul. "Or do you want to hear about it from the other girls tomorrow?"

The challenge worked.

The seven of them moved quietly up the stairs after everyone was fully dressed and prepared. The mist was heavy in the stairwells and flowed down and collected on the landings as they walked. With every step the fear grew. There were strange sounds that they became more aware of: a laugh from a room nearby, a moan. The thick wooden stairways creaked under their feet as they ascended.

"I feel like we're in some kind of old black and white *Dracula* movie," said Deacon as he led them up the stairs, as he was the only one who had been up there previously. They were not able to take the west stairs up, there were too many people still wandering the main floor even on a mist filled night like this. People also used the base of the west stairwell to get to the second floor rooms, so they took the east stairwell and made the very same walk as Deacon across the seventh floor corridor.

Their only source of light was from a few candles handed out for nighttime guard duty that Scott collected for this very purpose. They also had Liv's lighter, which amazingly had not yet run out of fluid, even after her new chain smoking habit. There were better sources of light in the hotel, flashlights, lanterns, and even a diesel generator that could power the entire facility, but it was only started on special occasions or in case of a nighttime attack. Light was yet another of the hotel's capacities completely controlled by Grimmon.

The large door that announced the seventh floor east wing stood abruptly before them.

"733 is down that hallway. I can't believe we're this close," whispered Wes.

"Deacon," said Paul, "will you take the honour?"

Deacon nodded and opened the door. A cavern of darkness opened up before them. The candles gave off scant light, and the corridor was so thick with mist they couldn't see more than a grey blur beyond fifteen feet. They were edgy before, but now they were outright terrified.

"I have to close my eyes," said Anna. "I'm seeing way too much."

Scott, committed to see this through, reached back and took her hand.

"Look, you guys," said Liv in her calmest and most persuasive tone, "what are we doing up here? It's not too late to go back. We can visit 733 anytime, right? I mean, why rush it? It's not *going* anywhere." Jen stood beside her and nodded in fervent agreement.

"C'mon, what are you afraid of, ghosts?" asked Scott who also sounded scared, but the condescension in his voice was still strong. "We're not here for 733, at least not tonight. It's locked, so we'll have to find the key…or an axe and a good explanation. We're here to see the bride on the stairs. Remember laughing at me about it? Doesn't seem so funny now, does it? But you're always welcome to turn around and go back to your rooms…*girls*."

Jen's look of terror turned to anger and she thrust her candle at him. "Okay then, hero, why don't you lead us?"

"*Pfft*!" mumbled Scott who took the candle and bravely stepped through the doorway with Anna in hand. The rest of them were unable to hear him curse under his breath, or see his expression of dread as he entered the cavernous corridor.

They walked together, slowly, with Wes and Jen taking the rear. The panic didn't hit until they were halfway down the hallway.

"Welcome home," emanated a familiar voice. It was the same raspy voice that taunted them when they searched for Scott in the forest. The very same voice that threatened them at the Rocky

Mountain Goods store. The voice of the mist.

"Did you guys hear that?" asked Scott. But they were unable to answer as it continued.

"You've come so far. A pity you will go no farther," continued the voice. It giggled softly.

"Yes, I can hear it. Maybe Liv's right, this isn't such a good idea. Not on a night like this," said Paul.

"Yeah, yeah, maybe you're right, pal," said Deacon who took a step backward. "Let's get out of here."

"*There is no escape from this hotel, children! NO ESCAPE*!" The voice was yelling now. It only mocked them previously, but now there was an anger in it they hadn't heard before.

All seven of them instantly turned around and ran. They did not take more than ten steps when the stairwell door ahead of them slammed shut with a thunderous bang. It was the kind of noise that would bring the hotel guards running. They also heard the patter of feet approaching them in the mist.

"Turn around, guys!" yelled Deacon. "Through the other exit!"

They turned and headed down the hallway away from the approaching footfalls. They had to be sure not to run so fast that they put out the candles, a possibility that scared Deacon even more than being caught by whatever was behind them. He'd already experienced more than enough of his share of being lost in the darkness.

Scott ran much harder than the rest of them and right into the far door. It appeared out of nothing in the mist front of him. The collision was so abrupt that it would have been comical under different circumstances. He got up and fumbled with the knob as the rest of them caught up.

"I'M COMING, KIDS, WE'RE ALL COMING FOR YOU! RUN! RUN! RUN!"

"Jesus, Scott, open it up!" wailed Jen.

It took a terrifying few moments, but Scott finally managed to get the rusted handle to open. The stairs in the hotel were seldom used, even at the height of the ski season when the elevators were busy operating. The handle on the seventh floor east stairwell door that Scott struggled with hadn't

been turned for some time.

The seven of them fumbled their way through the door and Deacon, Scott, Wes, and Anna instinctively pressed themselves up against it after they got through. Paul turned and stared. Jen and Liv were already descending the stairs when Deacon yelled at them.

"Help us hold it!"

They stopped, looked at each other, and made their way back up to help hold the door. From the expression on their faces, it was the last thing on earth they wanted to do.

"Did you see it?" asked Paul

"No. It was too dark, I couldn't make out what is was," panted Scott.

"No. I mean the room."

"What? No!"

"I got a weird feeling when we ran by it," said Paul.

"Would you help us hold the door!" said Scott who was terrified and frustrated with Paul.

"It's just the mist, you guys. There's no way that anything real is behind that door," said Paul.

"Didn't you hear the footsteps? The door slamming? How could something not be in there?" squeaked Anna.

"It was just noises, no different than the voice," said Paul. "I don't think anyone heard it but us, anyway. There should already be guards up here by now from the sound of that door slam."

"So, you think there's nothing in there?" asked Deacon.

"Yeah man, I'm positive."

"Just the same, why don't we hold it shut for a minute and see. If nothing tries to get through and kill us, let's write Paul a thank you letter," said Scott.

Deacon, whose force against the door had waned, once again pressed hard.

"I think the voice doesn't want us near that room. Did you hear it? It's trying to scare us away. We've got to find out what's in there," said Paul.

Suddenly, there was a click of a door handle, and Paul instantly jumped against the door, but they realized it came from the landing above. The door in the stairwell above them slowly opened.

Out walked the bride, at midnight, just as Scott promised.

They'd witnessed many tricks of the mist over the last year and a half. But she was nothing like those hallucinations. They were murky and incomplete compared to the the bride. In the mist hallucinations would suddenly disappear when you looked directly at them, or if you rubbed your eyes for a moment, but she did not. The seven of them stared directly at her and she did not so much as shimmer.

She floated only thirty feet above, her body and skin glowing with a weird greenish light. She was beautifully dressed in a bridal gown that only Liv's knowledge of fashion could date back to the early twenties, but they could all see she was from a distant time, with small pouting red lips, thin arching brows, and black curls of hair pressed against her cheeks and forehead. She looked down at them and smiled. There was pride in her face, and a sense of joy and expectation. But as they watched they could see that something was going wrong. Young cherubic cheeks turned to brown split flesh. Her eyes slowly sunk in and she became old and decrepit. The flowers she carried withered in her hands, and they watched her fingers turn to bone and rotted flesh. Slowly and carefully she pulled up her dress and stepped down.

They were too terrified to scream, and too intertwined with one another to get up and run in time. Her foot accidentally stepped down the stair onto the slippery silk train of her dress, but instead of falling backwards, she lurched forward. Her body reeled, and she let out an awful screech, a sound they would never forget. It resonated with terror, but there also a sense of resignation; the scream was heartbreaking, like she knew that she was about to break her neck on the most important day of her life. They realized the specter knew, at that very moment, she was about to die and leave a forever bereaved fiancé waiting out in the garden for her, wondering why she was taking so long. The scream ended abruptly as her neck snapped like the sound of a wishbone being split, and she tumbled down

the stairs right onto them as they watched, immobile on the landing.

They shrieked, and only Scott managed to keep any pressure against the door.

"Fuck, get her off!" yelled Paul, struggling against her. He was the only one of them that could even make out words in the terror of the situation. Her body seemed to grapple with them, to hold on, bone fingers digging into their clothes, a decomposed leg wrapping around their bodies. They thrashed about, fighting with her grip and screaming with horror.

"She's not there!" shouted Deacon.

They continued to struggle.

"Listen to me, she's not there!"

Only Paul stopped. He closed his eyes and breathed. When he opened them, she was gone.

"Deek's right! It's only an illusion," gasped Paul with relief. "She's not there. It's just in your head."

The clinging dead body disappeared, and all that surrounded them was a mist that continued to trickle down the stairs. Liv, who was perhaps the most horrified at the incident, was hyperventilating. They sat there together for a moment, listening to her struggle for breath; Scott still pressed himself against the doorway.

Paul reached down and picked up something. "You guys aren't going to believe this. It's a key."

"What key?" asked Jen who moved to help Scott hold the door. She, like him, was still not convinced what they'd heard in the corridor was only an illusion.

"A room key. I think it was in her hand," said Paul.

"What room?" asked Deacon.

"733," responded Paul.

"Ohh, that's great. *That's wonderful*," said Scott, who banged his head against the door.

"Explain this to me, Paul. How can something that's in our imaginations carry something

real?" asked Wes, who moved to join Jen and Scott at the door. Liv remained frozen and struggling for breath on the floor.

"Well…I guess…I guess I can't explain everything; look at what we just saw! Maybe it was already sitting here on the floor," said Paul.

"Hey look, another one," said Deacon who picked up yet another key on the floor. "Room 913."

"I wonder what's in that one?" asked Wes.

"The flower girl and bridesmaids, looking young and fresh, I'm sure," muttered Scott.

"At one time…yes," Anna concurred. It was hers, it was where she slept before the big day. There's more than one room in this hotel with secrets."

They shifted uncomfortably. Just as the fear began to melt away the door handle behind them clicked and a force began to push it open.

"Run!" yelled Scott.

And run they did, with Liv in front, down six flights of stairs, through the second floor wing, down the east stairwell, across the lobby, through the dining hall, and into Scott's room where all seven of them slept together in the same quarters for the first time since coming to the hotel.

Chapter 29 – The Feast

Wesley David – Entry # 29

The first two weeks here were lovely. We made friends, ate well, worked hard and generally became part of the big, if a bit weird, family that is the Banff Springs Hotel. My arm began to heal again with no sign of gangrene or serious infection that could easily kill a person in this "brave" new world. I even saw a few girls that piqued my interest. We got too comfortable. Again.

And then the mist came.

The last week has been absolutely miserable. It started out with a horrifying experience on the stairwell near room 733, that you wouldn't believe happened anyway, so I may as well not bother you with it. You can take two things from the event: I've had intense nightmares every night this week, and Paul now has the key to room 733.

And it continued to get worse. The mist has not let up at all. The people here are irritable, fighting, and hallucinating. There have been two attacks: a group of Creepers that Deek and Paul helped to kill, and a Grey Man posing as a hungry young girl that nearly killed a guy named Scott – not our Scott. (It's no wonder the people here didn't trust us at first.) Three people are missing. Two of them ran from the hotel claiming it was going to kill them or some such nonsense, and the third, an elderly gentleman named Bert, patted Grimmon on the back and said he was tired of living in fear and walked out alone into the mist. No one even tried to stop him.

We're down to one meal a day on Grimmon's orders. He says it's because there are not enough people in the proper state of mind to cook and clean, and because we are using up too much of the "dry stock" as he calls it. Rubbish. If you ask me, he is way too paranoid. If you only knew how much food is in this hotel. You could feed an army. The food we brought with us would be enough to feed everyone here for a week. I have a theory. He's trying to starve us. Well, not necessarily "us". He's trying to starve me, maybe Liv too, I'm not sure. I think they're having meals without me, telling me to stay quiet in my room, or to go on guard duty, with only one meager meal in the morning. I can

hear them outside the door. They try to hide it but I've heard forks falling from tables, and the sound of tender meat being cut. Deacon's in on it, he looks to me like he's grown since we got here. Of course, it's just a theory...and it may be the mist playing with me. In fact, it probably is. What am I talking about? Of course it is. I've got to fight hard to keep the paranoia from taking hold.

To think that hunger pains had almost become a memory.

No one who has been at the hotel since the beginning remembers the mist being this thick or lasting for this long. We have been exposed to so much mist before coming here that I think it doesn't affect us as strongly now, or give us the "hangover" that it used to, but the people here have not had our level of exposure.

But there is hope. The few guards that still man the top floor balconies have reported that the mist is starting to drain from the valley. They say the air is getting cleaner up there. I was told that you get a headache from the fresh air if you're up there too long. I personally haven't had the balls to get myself back on the stairwells yet. Deacon seems to be spending all his time up there. I wish I had the guts to climb those stairs and join him, but I for one will wait for the mist to pass after what I experienced last week.

Oh yeah, have I mentioned that I'm never EVER getting married?

* * *

Liv quickly climbed up the stairs. The shady stairwell brought her mind back to the body of the bride lying on her, grabbing her arms and her back. Chills travelled down her spine.

"C'mon, girl, you can do this," she said to herself.

They struggled for a week in this mist and she didn't think she could take much more. She suspected she was not the only one. Liv heard Jen and Anna talking about how Deacon had been spending a lot of time up on the top balcony lookout. There was some talk that the air was clearer up

there, and there was a rumor the mist dropped below the top of the hotel and that it was a sight to see. She first heard about it early that morning, but her fear of the stairways held her back. It was the news that Deacon was up there alone that pushed her courage over the edge.

It was daylight, but it was still grey and quiet in the poorly lit stairwell. Her skin prickled as she approached the seventh floor. She was not in the west stairwell, but they looked very much the same, and every time she turned a corner she half imagined, half saw, the shape of a white dress disappear around the top of the next landing. It was her desire to get out of the mist, and out of the stairwell that pushed her on to the top floors. As she passed the sixth floor doorway she ran, powering up the stairs at a full sprint as she passed the doorway to the seventh floor. When she finally reached the top of the tenth floor she started to cough and wheeze. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest.

"Jesus, I have to calm down," she said to herself

"What's that?" asked Deacon from the top of the stairs.

Liv jumped back in surprise. Her heart only pounded harder with the scare, and at being alone with Deacon again.

"Oh nothing. I'm…a little winded from the stairs," she said as coolly as she could.

"It's the smoking…if you're coming up here, you should come quickly. The mist is dropping fast. You can almost see it draining out of the valley, like someone pulled a plug in a bathtub."

"That's good news. It's getting pretty crazy down there."

"I know," said Deacon who turned and opened the door to the corridor.

Liv was disappointed to see they were not alone when they entered the large suite from the eleventh floor hallway. There were people lying on the bed, standing out on the balcony, and even a few young men playing cards on a huge ornate kitchen table. The room was among the nicest the hotel had to offer, and Liv was sure it had played host to a plethora of royalty and celebrities. A few of the guys looked up at Liv as she walked in but she didn't get the stares she was used to. The mist had

drained the life out of everyone over the past week. Liv took a deep breath of the air as they walked out onto the balcony and smiled. It was almost clear of the haze, and so cool she struggled to keep from coughing again as she exhaled.

When Liv looked out on the valley she couldn't help but choke at the spectacle before her. A thick white cloud of haze filled the enormous basin below with only the tops of the surrounding mountains breaking out of its white cover. It made her feel as if she were standing much higher than she actually was, like on the peak of Mount Everest, as she could not see any of the ground below. The mist swirled and twisted in fluffy clouds below her and the bright sunshine beamed down on top of it, creating rounded shadows that ribbed across the valley. It was like a giant plain of snow moguls and it was unlike anything she had even seen before. For some reason it made her think of Joshua Siward's intricately jeweled knife.

"My God. It's amazing," she couldn't help but whisper with respect for the scene.

"It truly is," said Deacon who took her hand and turned to look into her eyes. "Stunning."

* * *

Scott was happier than anyone when the mist finally dissipated later that day. You couldn't wipe the smile from his face as he sat with three other men, rifles in hand, guarding the east door. They sat there together quietly, lost in their own thoughts and awaiting a return to normality around the hotel.

Scott was hungry again. The food had been so good for the first two weeks. Fresh vegetables, thick barbequed deer steaks, pan fried trout, fresh bread, even a bowl of saskatoon berries, hazelnuts and sugar for dessert on Sunday, but all that changed over the last week. His daily meal for the past seven days was only broth and a tough piece of smoked mystery meat that reminded him of what they'd dined on over the last year. Scott loved his family, and missed them dearly, but what he had

come to miss most often was that wonderful feeling of satiation after a good dinner. But then as Scott thought about it more he decided what he really loved, even more than that wonderful feeling of fullness, was pizza. He'd gone without any sex, drugs, or rock and roll for the last year and a half, and he was okay with that, it was only pizza that he craved. He would kill a man for a couple of extra large pies. Maybe even for a slice. Likely a meat lovers or Hawaiian. But as his luck would have it he wouldn't need to. There was a feast planned for tonight, celebrating the withdrawal of the mist, and from the rumors he heard, it was going to be excellent. It was said the hotel was well stocked the day of The Arrival, and the stores had never been looted. There was talk that the break in the mist had given Grimmon a little bit of *carpe diem* fever and he was going to allow the generators to be fired up. There was going to be music, light, alcohol, and a dinner unlike anything they'd enjoyed in some time, and from what Scott heard, there was going to be pizza, cooked in the kitchen's forno oven.

Would tonight ever arrive?

* * *

Paul rubbed the large silver key in his hand. A standard hotel key, with the numbers 733 etched in it. For the last week a thought tucked somewhere deep in the back of his head made Paul wonder if the key was even real. The mist was so thick he questioned his own senses. Now it had cleared away and the cold key still sat in his hand. He knew it was real and that it was almost time. But it was not the key that perplexed him. In his other hand sat the key to the truck, taken from this morning's unsuccessful hunting expedition. Deacon asked him for it. He said that he had a bad feeling about the feast and dance tonight, and he thought Paul should "forget" to put it back until the next morning. It was a risky thing to do; if Grimmon found out he might think they were trying to leave, and they risked getting kicked out before they could pilfer the hotel of fuel and food. But Paul still did it for him. Something in Deacon's voice made him uneasy. He was too serious, even for Deacon, and he'd

been acting a little strange of late, unusually sad and anxious. Paul wanted to believe that it was problems with Jen, or maybe just the mist affecting him, but he knew Deacon was the most resistant out of them all, and he spent much of his time over the last week on the eleventh floor where the haze was thinner. Paul wanted to believe it was the mist that made Deacon want that truck key so badly, but he knew that wasn't the case. Deacon *knew* something.

* * *

Wes sorted through the huge stacks of CDs that lined the back storeroom behind the DJ booth. The collection was old when Wes was in diapers and most of it he didn't recognize. Without phones or laptops, however, the CDs were their only option. The club in the hotel had been abandoned for the last year and a half and Wes blew grey chunks of dust and stringy cobwebs from the tops of the equipment. He and two other lucky people, a tall skinny red haired kid with bad skin named Jordan, and a nice looking older woman named Cloe, were chosen to get the equipment and music ready for when the generator was fired up. Wes and Cloe's job was to pick out and dust off the CDs that they would play that night while Jordan took great pride in having been chosen as the electronics expert. He was responsible to get the music working, a task he took on with great seriousness.

"Oh, my God. Vanilla Ice? Do you think we'll get a request for this one?" asked Cloe, dusting off the cover and jotting the title down on a piece of paper.

"God, I hope not," replied Wes. "But I think we're going to be bombarded with requests. I can't believe how much I've missed some of these songs. I play them in my head sometimes but it's not the same when you have to do the work, instead of sitting back and enjoying."

Cloe was too mesmerized by the selection of CDs to respond to Wes, but he neither minded nor blamed her. The cover art for some of the albums brought back such strong feelings of nostalgia he felt like he could cry. His memory was flooded with pictures of his old room, high school dances,

and drunken parties.

"What's the first song we should play tonight?" Cloe asked Wes.

Wes raised his eyebrows and smiled. "'The Monster Mash'?"

* * *

Anna was exhausted as she peeled the potatoes in the large kitchen of the hotel. Sleep did not come easily, and the little she could get was constantly interrupted. She couldn't remember exactly what her dreams were revealing to her over the last week, the mist made them confusing and difficult to decipher. Except last night. Last night's was different. Last night she awoke to Richard Empire's nightmare.

Thankfully, all she could remember was the end. A Giant Black stood before her, its body so dark it seemed to suck in the light around it. At its feet were mountain flowers that wilted to brown as the beast stood above. As she looked up over its scaled form it inhaled deeply, its chest taking in more air than Anna could breathe in an hour. Large ribs stood out as its chest expanded, taking in more and more. It stopped, looked down, and set a huge hoofed foot before her. Anna could feel a light breeze blow through her hair as they stared at each other in silence. And then it screamed. She screamed with the beast, letting out all the air that was inside. She realized after a time that she was sitting up in her bed, throat raw, drenched in sweat, with blood pounding through her veins.

It was hours ago and her ears still rung. She knew the dream was an omen, and she thought she could feel storm clouds gathering around the hotel.

* * *

Jen paced back and forth across the carpet of their room. She was excited for tonight's dinner

but worried about Deacon. He'd spent very little time with her lately, opting instead to stand on the balcony and watch the mist in the valley. He hadn't invited her to join him even once. She knew Deacon could be distant at times, and she blamed the mist for his behavior, but when she found he had packed up his bag and placed a loaded hand gun and his axe under the bed she became suspicious. When she confronted him over it, he acted strangely, telling her it was for precaution and that he was sorry. Sorry for what?

Tears came and Jen lightly sobbed.

Deacon was leaving.

* * *

There was a strange noise all throughout the hotel as the generator clunked to life. Cold, forgotten lamps slowly flickered on, bringing a light and warmth that had been gone for a very long time. The lights above the front door of the hotel came on above Paul, and he watched pole after pole in the parking lot flicker to life. Paul thought he could see something at the far end of the lot quickly scurry away out of the light. He suspected it was nothing more than a rabbit or fox.

Of the group, only Paul had to work a guard shift for the night, allowing his remaining six companions to sit together and enjoy the evening in the large conference room without him. The guards were chosen by drawing names from a hat, and the unfortunate souls picked were not happy about it. They would be allowed to eat after the feast was finished and they were promised a shift off later in the week, but it did little to change their disappointment. Many of them tried to offer bribes, or complain, but it did little good. Grimmon calmly said it was their duty and that he would be joining them after dinner. When Paul's name was picked, only the second unfortunate person out of twenty, he shrugged with disappointment, and accepted it. He wasn't much of a dancer, and they needed someone with a clue to keep an eye out while the rest of the people were celebrating. Still, he wished it

could have been someone else. But at least he wouldn't have to do dishes.

Paul Dean leaned his chin on the butt of his rifle and sighed.

* * *

It was surprising to see so many people gathered in one place at the same time. No one had seen a crowd like this in years and it was interesting to see how many people actually called the hotel home. Everyone at the hotel came dressed to impressed for the occasion, brushed teeth and clean shaven faces shone around the tables. Even the occasional tie and evening dress could be seen, pilfered from the small shops around the hotel. Grimmon set out twenty guards, allowing the remaining ninety two guests to enjoy the festivities. The only rule of the night for those who were not chosen as guards was that if you served and cooked the food, you would not have to clean up. Everyone except Anna would be taking part in that chore after the meal was complete.

"Everyone, quiet please!" called Grimmon as he stood up at the front of the conference room on an elevated stage. He looked younger and stronger than he usually did under the bright light of the ceiling chandeliers. He had cleaned himself up for the occasion, and wore a bright red wide shouldered Royal Canadian Mounted Police jacket. It made him look like a king.

"Good evening, everyone, and welcome to tonight's festivities. We have been through a very tough week. And a very tough summer. We all deserve this," said Grimmon.

The talk around the tables died and he continued.

"We have lost seven people this summer, among them, my son, Cory."

Grimmon took a short pause and continued.

"And I know the mist has been very difficult. None of us has seen it this bad before, but the worst of it is behind us, and we must all carry on. We *must* persevere. There are things that should bring us hope, there are still positive things in our lives. We've had a very successful summer

gathering food. Already, I feel we'll have enough to last us well into spring and beyond, and the gardens haven't even been fully harvested. We've also had seven new arrivals, to replace those we have lost, a group of young men and women who, after a difficult beginning, have proven to be hard working and a beneficial addition to our community. Many of you also know Peggy Shaw. If you're not already aware, she and her husband Bill here are proud to announce that she's pregnant, already four months in. We look forward to seeing our community grow and welcome the laughter of children in these halls."

A clap began and a surprisingly young woman they didn't recognize stood up and waved to the audience uncomfortably. Grimmon continued.

"I know many of you are worried that Sergeant Walbeck and his men have not been by to pick up their monthly rations. I share your worry. But we can only hope, and pray, they are safe and that they, and all the forces around the world, are winning the fight against the curse that has fallen on our times. But tonight, we will celebrate our bounty and good fortune. We will be thankful for this magnificent hotel, and the strong community of individuals that call it home. I ask everyone to take a drink and toast. To the Hotel."

There was a large clinking of glass, and everyone repeated Grimmon's words.

"Eat and enjoy yourselves. It is harvest moon, an event that has been celebrated for thousands of years, and it will become a feast that we will enjoy every year at this hotel, for many, many years to come, God willing. The generator will shut down sometime after midnight as we must conserve our fuel for the cold nights of winter. But I want you all to stay wary and show caution, as we are always in danger in these times….Enjoy your night. Responsibly."

There was a cheer and standing ovation for Grimmon. He was liked and respected at the hotel, and deservedly so. The food was fabulous, and was the best meal they'd enjoyed for some time, perhaps ever in their lives. It was simpler than what would have been served in the convention area years before. There was no caviar, or French wine, but they did what they could to make up for it. The

meal went on and on as course after course was wheeled into the hall. Everyone ate more than their share after a week of near fasting, and plates had to be made for the guards before there was nothing left. Spirits were high. Most people enjoyed a drink or two, their first from the small selection of bottled alcohol put out with the dinner, and the following drinks came from Bill's very own homemade potato vodka. A drink that some of them had already tasted from Cory's canteen. They danced, yelled and talked, and even those who cleaned up after the meal were happy to do so. Many speeches and announcements were made as they ate. Some people took the microphone to let everyone know how thankful they were, or to propose an idea. There were many laughs, and some tears, throughout dinner as people paid homage to some of the souls lost over the last year. It was a good experience for the group, as they came to know many of their comrades better, and began to feel like they had become an accepted part of the community. Almost two hours later, they sat back in their chairs, filled to the brim.

"My God, that was fantastic," said Liv who rested her hands on her small, yet full, stomach.

"I think the first meal we've had that was even in the same realm was at the Williams's house," said Wes.

"That was pretty good, but nothing compared to this. Coming to this hotel was the best idea we've ever had," said Scott who rubbed his stomach much the same as Liv.

"I don't how much of a *choice* it was," said Deacon, who ate well, but far less than they would have expected. He also only sipped lightly on his drink.

"What's the problem, Deek?" asked Wes. "You seem distracted. Usually you would be the life of the party, right after Scotty, of course. Are you trying to fill in for Paul tonight?"

"Naw. I'm fine. I'm…trying to be careful…especially tonight, with all these people letting their guard down," answered Deacon.

"Shit. Don't worry about it, Deek. Paul's out front looking out for us, and there are twenty guards posted. They'll take care of things," said Scott.

"Yeah, that was a real shame he got picked, huh? I don't think that guard duty tonight could have happened to a nicer guy," said Anna.

They all broke out laughing. Deacon only smiled.

"I thought Paul was going to burst out in tears when his name was called!" said Jen who already had a slur to her voice. "Did you see him looking all tough after too, pretending he didn't care?"

"I could tell he was wishing one of us was going to get called out there with him. He seemed even madder when he was the only one of us to go," said Wes.

"It's too bad though, that he couldn't be here with us. It would have been good to have one nice meal…you know…all seven of us together again," said Deacon.

"I'm sure there will be other nights… right?' asked Jen, qestioningly. Deacon was unable to respond, as at that moment Grimmon again came to the podium.

"I hope everyone enjoyed that delicious meal. I for one ate my share…and yours," said Grimmon who now seemed more relaxed than when he first spoke. "Let's give a big hand to the cooks who put together such a remarkable feast."

There was a loud cheer. Deacon studied the room uncomfortably as Grimmon continued.

"We're going to move on to the nightclub for those of you who can stand up. Please remember to enjoy yourselves responsibly tonight, and be ready for another day's work tomorrow. The latrine dumping rule automatically applies to anyone who's late for their duties."

There was a moan and then a final applause for both Grimmon and the meal, and people made their way out of the conference room toward either the nightclub or the kitchen for cleanup, depending on their duties. There was a sense of euphoria among everyone; it was going to be a night to remember.

* * *

Paul sat outside the front entrance and leaned against the steps. He was not the only guard who was feeling disappointed. Mark, an older man with long hair who was chosen right after him, looked like he was going to cry. They could occasionally hear an explosion of laughter from inside the conference room. Paul could do little more than swear under his breath and rub his rifle as he listed to the celebrations.

"Dinner, girls and boys!"

A young girl that Paul did not recognize handed out large plates piled high with assorted leftovers from inside. The food was still very good, if a bit cold. They were the last guards to be fed out of the twenty and were left with the last of the food. It allowed Paul and the other four guards at the front entrance to eat more than their share, but it didn't come close to making up for their disappointment.

"Paul, anything happening out here?" asked Grimmon as he strode out of the front door.

Paul, with a mouthful of food, struggled to swallow before speaking.

"*Ngaw*...no…we haven't seen a thing…a few animals when the lights went on. The light poles sure make guarding the front entrance and parking lot easier. The boys upstairs should be able to see and take down anything that comes out of the forest. Nothing'll get by tonight."

"Good. Very good. I will be out here to join you soon, I'm going to see that the festivities get moved to the nightclub. Be careful, the music might get in the way of any noises out there," said Grimmon.

"We will," said Paul.

"That goes for all of you. Keep your eyes and ears open and stay focused. These lights and the music are bound to attract something tonight. I know you're angry about missing the dinner, and that's fine, but you've got a job to do and I expect it done properly."

Everyone responded with some kind of unmotivated agreement.

"Alright, I'll see you shortly."

* * *

Lucky panted and moaned beneath Wes's bed. The young dog could hear the laughter and smell the food from the festivities on the floor below, but it was not what upset her. Lucky could sense what approached.

* * *

After getting the kitchen half cleaned, the group, along with thirty or forty other people, hurried toward their rooms to make some last minute adjustments before going to the nightclub. Many people wanted to slip into something a little more comfortable, and to clean up before the real party started. There were angry complaints at Liv for taking too long to get ready because they wanted to make their appearance together. When they finally arrived, the music was playing and people were already dancing. Jordan had not only managed to get the music on but also the stage lighting and smoke machine. Lights swirled from the large disco ball on the ceiling and green and red beams twisted and flipped in the smoke. Already the tables and dance floor were filling up with people. The six of them looked in on the scene through the large double doors with big smiles on their faces.

"It's like a time warp," said Scott.

"I can't believe this. We're actually gonna have *fun* tonight," said Liv, who reached in her pocket and drew out one of her few remaining cigarettes. She had so few left now that hiding them no longer mattered.

The girls headed directly to the dance floor, while the guys took a detour to the liquor. They were so excited that even Jen didn't notice Deacon did not come in with them.

* * *

"Pauly! How's the guard shift?" asked Deacon.

Paul sat on the steps of the front entrance shoveling in the last of his dinner. The air was cold, and above them fingers of green northern lights danced in the sky.

"Deek! What are you doing out here? The fun's inside man, *or so I'm told*," answered Paul, surprised to see anyone at all.

"Bah, it's not as much fun as you think. It didn't take long for people to get shallow, I already saw them fighting over what song would be played next. Shit, it's probably more dangerous inside there than it is out here."

Paul laughed. "Yeah, there hasn't been so much as a *boo* tonight."

"That's good…that's good," said Deacon. "Hey, did you get the key like I asked?"

Paul rubbed his shoulder uncomfortably. "Yeah I did. And I hope you know I'm risking a world of shit if I get caught."

"Nobody'll notice, man."

"Well, *I've* noticed. Have you got somewhere to *go* tonight, Deacon?"

"Not especially," answered Deacon with a look of guilt.

"Then what the hell do you need the truck key for?" asked Paul.

"Maybe I just don't want anyone drinking and driving tonight," answered Deacon with a smile.

"*Pfft*! I don't think you will be able to drag anyone out of that club until they're passed out. Besides, it's not like they can drive down to the 7-11 and pick up some nachos for a nightcap. The guards upstairs will see you driving out of here if you try to go somewhere tonight, Deek. They'll shoot out a tire on ya. Besides, if you leave tonight, and I can't imagine why you would, you'll leave the rest of us in deep with Grimmon. Come on, Deek. I'm not giving you the key, until you at least tell me why you want it."

Paul looked at Deacon seriously. He wasn't kidding; he wasn't going to give Deacon the key

unless he had some kind of reasonable explanation.

Deacon sighed. He seemed tired and agitated. Quite unlike himself. "Remember when Sara Williams pulled me aside and gave me the note?"

Paul nodded.

"She said a few other things to me too. And so far, it's all come true. She talked about the hotel, and I told you she said some of us wouldn't go beyond it…but she also said a few other things that I've never brought up before. Not even to Jen. Sara told me about a feast…she said…she said *it* would happen the *night of the feast*."

Paul swallowed hard. "That *what* would happen?"

"The Departure."

Paul shivered. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know. I have no idea. But I want that key just in case," Deacon looked directly at Paul. "I can promise you this, if you're still here in the morning, I will be too, and we can put the key back first thing, and share a laugh about Sara Williams, and what a crazy old coot she was."

Paul shook his head but handed him the truck key. "She wasn't crazy, Deek. We both know that. You've been a good friend and I should have known better than to think you would do anything to cause the rest of us grief. I'm proud we've come this far together."

Deacon's eyes became glassy. "I'm sorry, Paul. I…I can't go into that room. I've been dreading this night for so long. She told me Paul. She told me. I can't go into 733."

"Look, Deek, it's okay. You hold onto the key tonight and give it to me tomorrow. We'll figure out what's in that room soon enough, and whatever Sara Williams was talking about. Go have a good time, or at least try, and you can explain it all to me tomorrow."

Deacon took a deep breath and struggled to get a hold of himself. "Okay, Paul. Thanks. Good luck tonight."

Paul smiled, leaned back, and put up his boots on the railing. "C'mon, Deek. You don't need

luck when you're *this* good."

Chapter 31 – Disco Inferno

Wesley David - Entry #31

I have nothing to complain about tonight. Well, I suppose Liv is taking too long to get ready, but besides that, life is pretty damn good. I'm going to go out and get drunk, something I haven't done for a long time. We had a great meal earlier. I feel so damn good nothing could bring me down.

But I will have something to complain about tomorrow. My hangover.

* * *

Wes realized he was starting to get drunk as he stood with Scott and leaned against the bar. They'd spent the night drinking and watching people dance with big smiles on their faces. On occasion, when the right song came on, they too would get out and dance.

"Hey, where's Deek?" yelled Wes over the music.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him since we got here," replied Scott.

They looked across the dance floor to see Jen standing at a table with her arms crossed, searching the crowd. She did not seem happy. Out on the dance floor Liv and Anna danced with a large group of younger people.

"Check out Jen. She looks pissed," said Scott.

"Yeah, does she ever," replied Wes.

"Oh well, I'm not going to let something between those two ruin *my* night," said Scott.

"I'm with you on that one. Another drink, Scotty?" asked Wes.

"You know it."

* * *

Deacon loaded his bag, axe, extra supplies, and extra gas into the back of the truck. He ran around walls and hid behind columns like a burglar to get to the loading bay unnoticed. The last thing he wanted to do was to have to come up with some kind of an explanation for Bill or Grimmon about what he was doing. There was nothing they would believe other than he intended to steal the truck and leave the hotel. The truth was that he didn't want to. That he had absolutely no desire to. But he knew fate might get in the way of his plans. Deacon took the handgun from his bag and tucked it in the small of his back. He refused to carry a loaded pistol in the front of his pants, even with the safety on.

Deacon left for the nightclub. If this was indeed his last night at the Banff Springs Hotel, he wanted to spend it with his friends.

* * *

Paul's head lightly bobbed to the faint music in the background as he looked out onto the huge parking lot spread before him. His mind wasn't in it tonight, even with Deacon's obscure warnings. Everyone's thoughts were back in the nightclub, dancing and drinking, even if they couldn't physically be there. He looked at the other guards that sat with him in silence over the last few hours. Paul was sure he shared the same disappointed expression that they wore on their faces.

"And how is everything going here, ladies and gents?" asked Grimmon, doing yet another round. He was on a steady cycle of visiting the guards at each door and occasionally he even went up to the eleventh floor to visit the watch on the roof. He usually checked to ensure no one had fallen asleep, but tonight, his biggest fear was they would abandon their posts for the party inside.

"Can't complain, Grimmon," replied one of the embittered guards.

"I see we have a little bit of mist forming out there," said Grimmon staring off into the distance.

"Yeah," said Paul. "But it's not too bad. Nothing like last week. I wouldn't be surprised if most

of it's natural."

Suddenly both of their eyes caught a dark shape scamper across the parking lot, hovering above the thin layer of mist floating on the asphalt. Before either of them could react, a shot fired from above, the blast echoing through the valley. Both Grimmon and Paul witnessed the short black figure's shoulder explode and the shape fall to the ground.

"Nice shot, boys!" yelled Grimmon. "I suspected we would see some critters tonight, especially with all the hullabaloo going on around here. It was starting to worry me that we hadn't seen anything yet. I guess I can't say it's *too quiet* out there anymore."

From out of the cover of trees another dark shape abruptly emerged into the misty parking lot. Paul lifted his rifle to aim but again a shot from the eleventh floor hit the creature, this time directly in the head.

"Another one!" said Grimmon, this time a little more concerned. "That should wake the rest of the guards up."

They all watched intensely for more but nothing appeared and they collectively let out a deep breath. Grimmon spoke. "You haven't had too much fun out here tonight, but I'm sure glad you made the sacrifice. I could tell how pissed off some of you were when your names were drawn, and I don't blame you, but as you can see this was an important job. To think Bill only wanted to go with half the guards and almost argued me into…Jesus Christ in heaven…."

In the distance, high above the pines, a wall of mist suddenly appeared moving directly toward them. The light from the parking lot poles bounced off of it, revealing no end in sight either vertically or horizontally. It looked like an enormous glacier of white cotton candy. It was thicker than anything any of them had ever seen before. Below the approaching wall, from out of the trees, before the cover of the haze, emerged all different kinds of dark shapes in a number beyond counting. Paul could make out multiple sets of huge black antlers that rose above the rest of them. Some of the shapes slithered, some hopped, some stomped while others walked, and they were all coming directly toward them.

Gunfire erupted from the hotel, and blasts echoed throughout the valley. Both Paul and Grimmon fired and reloaded over and over again. Many shapes fell and were enveloped by the mist that approached behind them, but every time a shape fell, another took its place.

"We've got to warn everyone!" yelled Paul, horrified.

"Go!" agreed Grimmon, who let another blast fly from his rifle.

As Paul bolted down the corridor he remembered Deacon telling him something about a departure. After what he'd witnessed, Paul couldn't help but think there would be no departure for anyone on this night.

* * *

Wes hadn't drank for a very long time and his resistance to alcohol wasn't what it used to be. *Actually,* he thought, *it was never all that good.* He struggled all night long to keep up with Scott, but knew if he continued he was going to pay the price. He was already pissed. The music pounded in his ears and vibrated in his chest. He took a deep breath and looked across the smoky dance floor at the sweaty shapes bouncing along with the music. Scott was trying to yell something at one of the girls who had checked him out earlier, but she no longer seemed interested. The light from the disco ball hit his eyes over and over again and he smiled. Everything was getting a bit uneven for him, and the room was starting to spin a little, but it felt good.

"I hear she's a tramp, anyway, Wes," joked Scott. "But it's been a long time since…ya know!" Scott pulled back his arms and gave a solid thrust of his hips. Scott laughed and lifted his glass in cheers. Wes brought his own up and clinked it with a smile. He was a little uncomfortable as the smoke around them reminded him of the mist. Wes was sure Grimmon would have disapproved if he saw it for himself. It was thick in the club, but everyone was too drunk, or too distracted, to care.

Wes looked across the dance floor and his breath caught. He put down his drink, shook his head and rubbed his eyes before looking back up. It changed nothing. Before him was a room full of dancing and celebrating Creepers. They poured and mixed drinks at the liquor table with long black four fingered hands. On the dance floor they bounced back and forth with the music, sharp teeth reflecting in the light. Long inverted black legs extended out of short skirts. Lipstick and eyeliner adorned their bony black faces. Above them all was a tall ugly Creeper manning the CD player and taking requests from a group that screamed and argued below. Everywhere the creatures laughed and lifted glasses, all with big smiles showing off the shredding teeth that instantly made Wes move his hand to cover the scabbed wound on his arm. Wes struggled to breathe in the thick air.

"Are you okay, dude?" asked a big Creeper beside Wes that wore Scott's striped black T-shirt.

"I…I gotta get outta here," said Wes feeling woozy and panicked. He knocked over his glass and stumbled toward the closed double doors. The Creeper that wore Scott's T-shirt grabbed his arm and helped him along.

Wes leaned into the doors and pushed them open hard. The bright corridor light flooded into the club, along with a thick white mist.

* * *

Deacon was starting to think that he ruined a perfectly good night. His friends drank, danced, and partied for hours without him, while he wandered the hallways around the hotel and waited for something to happen. And now he was about to join them, but the night was already beginning to wind down. He was so convinced what Sara Williams told him would come true, he'd not only ruined the first night in the last year and a half that he had to enjoy himself, but he risked getting them all kicked out of the hotel by taking the truck key. What was he doing? What had he planned?

What if she wouldn't come with him?

Deacon convinced himself to quietly return the truck key and was walking to the bay where the vehicle was stored when he heard the eruption of gunfire. The pops and screams from outside made the skin on his neck tighten and his knees weaken. He stopped, took a deep breath, and pulled the pistol out from the back of his pants. Weapon in hand, he took off to find her.

* * *

Paul flew down the lobby and through the main hallway toward the source of the music. His feet barely touched the floor now covered in a mist that thickened as he approached the nightclub. Before him two slouched, yet familiar, figures appeared around a corner.

"Paul! Glad you're here!" said Scott. "Wes is sick, gimme a hand."

"They're coming, Scott!" yelled Paul who realized he'd barely breathed at all while he ran. "We've got to find Deacon!"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"The hotel's being attacked. There are too many to fight. We've got to get out."

"Oh, my God…not tonight," said Scott.

Wes looked up and shook his head with the sobering news. "It's okay, Scott. I was seeing things but I'm okay now."

"I've got to warn everyone in the club," said Paul. "Meet at Scott's room, it's closest to the loading bay. Make sure you guys get a rifle. They're getting a bunch out in the lobby. Hurry!"

Paul didn't even wait for Scott to reply, he just took off toward the nightclub. As Paul ran it dawned on him that Scott was right, there couldn't have been a worse night for this to happen. Even with a few extra guards on duty everyone else who could have helped defend the hotel was now drunk and essentially useless. Paul ran to the nightclub door and thrust it open. Music, smoke, and heat blasted out at him. Paul ran inside and yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Everyone out and to the lobby! We're being attacked!"

His voice was loud and strong, but only a few girls nearby heard him and in their state it didn't even register. They just looked at him and continued to dance, if a little slower. Paul looked across the room and made eye contact with Jen. She instantly realized from his expression that something was wrong, and ran down the stairs toward him.

"Listen to me! We're being attacked!"

Paul yelled even louder now and managed to get a few more people's attention. Some, who were not as drunk as the others, saw the rifle in Paul's hand, stopped, and stared at him. Some people managed to put things together and ran from the room, but the music continued to blare and most of the revelers continued to dance and talk, oblivious to the danger that was on them. Paul lifted his rifle toward the disco ball and squeezed the trigger. The blast shattered the ball and debris flew around the room in a cacophony of light. The music instantly stopped as pieces of Styrofoam and mirror fell to the ground. No one was oblivious any longer. With the music silenced the pops and bangs of gunfire echoed from both inside and outside the hotel. Everyone stood frozen by what they witnessed and what they realized was happening.

"We're under attack!" yelled Paul. There was still astounded silence.

"Do something!" shouted Paul again.

There was a shrill scream from a girl on the dance floor and chaos suddenly erupted in a mad dash for the door.

Jen fought her way down the rest of the stairs toward Paul.

"Where's Deacon?" she asked over the noise and chaos around them.

"I don't know, but he's a helluva lot smarter than me. He's got the key to the truck. He told me something was going to happen tonight. Christ, he's getting worse than Anna."

As if on cue Anna and Liv came to them, hand in hand, with sheer terror on their faces. They too sobered up as the lights came on. Last call.

"How serious is it, Paul? How many are there?" asked Liv.

Paul looked into her eyes.

"All of them."

* * *

Scott and Wes ran down the corridor and came into the main lobby where Grimmon and a group of men stood with rifles aimed at the front doorway.

"You! Grab a rifle and get in here now!" he yelled.

"What are we gonna do, Scott?" asked Wes who came to his senses enough to walk on his own. The floor still spun around him.

"We'd better do as he says for now," answered Scott. "Besides, like Paul said, those rifles might come in handy."

The two of them ran to the table and each took a rifle and a fistful of the bullets.

Suddenly Deacon came running into the lobby from the far side of the hotel. Grimmon also yelled at him to take up arms, but Deacon ignored the demand, and ran right by him without a response.

"Deacon!" said Scott. "What are you doing?"

Deacon quickly stopped and turned to him. "The girls, I've got to find them."

"It's okay, Paul's getting them right now!"

There was a crash against the massive wooden front doors; they buckled, but stood firm. Nails squeaked and boards cracked as the large pieces of wood protecting the front windows were stripped off by black arms and long thick fingers. Occasionally, a reflective set of eyes could be seen peering inside. Blasts erupted from the rifles at every opportunity, and already thick black blood splattered along the openings.

"I have to go! I have to save her," said Deacon, and he turned and bolted down the hallway. Suddenly, Grimmon turned and barked orders at the newly arrived drunken revelers that stumbled into the room. He knew them by name.

"Everyone grab a rifle and ammo, now. Jesse and Tom, load up and help us protect the windows and the front door! Frank and Jim, take those drunken girls and get them up to the second floor landing, and be careful, it looks like they're climbing the walls. Bill! Take these two newcomers and head down to the generator room and fill it up, and be quick, we've only got maybe fifteen minutes of juice left, and we sure as hell don't want this to end in the dark!"

Grimmon continued to bark orders over the blasts and the pounding on the front door when Bill grabbed Scott by the arm and motioned for the two of them to come.

"Bill, Wes is useless right now, he's too pissed, and we don't need him anyway," said Scott. Bill looked at the colour and expression on Wes's face and nodded. He motioned for Scott to come with him and ran for the stairwell. Scott quickly turned to Wes and spoke.

"Here's my key, get our shit together and we'll all meet at my room, got it?"

Wes nodded and ran. Scott darted in the other direction toward the stairwell. He looked back to see the doorway again splinter and shudder under another tremendous blow, but still it managed to hold.

* * *

Deacon struggled down the hallway against the throng of panicked revelers running the other way. Already he could see a Creeper struggling to bust its way through a boarded side window. From the end of the hallway, he could hear shots being fired, no doubt by the guards at the west doorway.

"Deacon!" yelled Jen, who stumbled down the corridor with Paul, Liv and Anna. "Jesus! Where've you been?"

Deacon finally breathed again when he saw their faces.

"It's okay, I'm here now. C'mon, we've gotta get out."

From behind the girls came the footfalls of three guards chased by a snarling group of Fangs. They watched as an older guard who fell behind was tackled and pounced on by the beasts. The image was frighteningly familiar. The remaining two guards didn't even look back at their comrade as they bolted right by the five of them.

"Get to Scott's room any way you can, we'll meet there, and then get to the loading bay. Deacon has the key to the truck. Go now!" yelled Paul. He lifted his rifle and fired a bullet directly into the head of a Fang that chose to run past the downed man, instead of stopping to dine with the others.

The girls ran on Paul's command, stumbling from the booze. Deacon and Paul stood together, with guns raised, in a desperate bid to buy them some time.

* * *

Wes ran out of the lobby into the stairwell and bounded up the stairs as fast as he could. His mind was panicked and he was having difficulty focusing. *Get the gear, and get to Scott's room, gear and Scott's room, gear and Scott's room.* All around Wes people screamed and ran this way and that; some toward the fighting, and some as far away as they could. He flung open the stairwell door to the second floor and made his way down the misty hallway when a familiar voice whispered around him.

"Wesley."

Wes rubbed his ears and his eyes and continued to run, trying to ignore it. Pretending it wasn't there. But the voice continued.

"It's too late, Wesley. The seven have been found. There is no escape."

"Would you just shut up!" yelled Wes, jumping and punching wildly into the air around him.

The people running by barely noticed as their minds were lost in their own panic. The voice laughed at him as he ran on.

As Wes finally reached his room he could hear Lucky barking madly inside. He struggled with the lock, as he usually did, but the alcohol made it more difficult and he twisted his keys wildly this way and that.

"I'm coming girl, I'm coming! Calm down in there!"

When Wes finally pushed the door open he understood why Lucky was so upset. His window was wide open, and what looked like a human stood in his room except it was naked and sexless, with grey skin and four long fingers on each hand. Wes's mouth dropped open as the thing turned its head toward him and hissed.

"No escape!"

* * *

Scott and Bill thundered down the concrete corridor of the sub basement. They had little worry of a creature getting down there, the real danger was getting lost in the seemingly endless labyrinth of dingy hallways at a time like this. Above them, the fluorescent lights, most in disrepair, began to flicker and fade, and in the distance the steady sound of the generator's motor began to clunk.

"Oh, Jesus. What do we do down here if it goes dark! What do we do in the dark, Bill?" asked Scott from behind.

"We die. Run faster!"

* * *

The three girls stumbled together down the hallway as fast as they could, but it did little for

their confidence when the guards that were supposed to be watching the door behind them roared by with rifles still in hand. The lights also occasionally dimmed, and they knew darkness would be fatal in this situation. They finally ran out into the lobby where Grimmon and a large group of men stood with rifles aimed at the front door.

"You, help us with this door! Now!" bellowed Grimmon. The girls were relieved when they saw he was speaking to the guards. The two young men stopped, both with tears in their eyes, and joined the group at the front door. The three girls turned away and ran behind them, trying to remain unseen.

"You girls too! Grab a weapon and help guard this door. "

Liv looked at Jen and Anna and quietly spoke. "Forget that, we should run." Liv grabbed the two girls and they darted for the nearby stairwell.

Grimmon was too busy to catch them, so he went on to bark orders at the other people crisscrossing the room. The girls would be dealt with later, in the same way as the others who ignored his orders.

As they reached the stairwell Anna looked back to see the doorway blow open. Two huge horns emerged, followed by the ducked head of a Giant Black that scanned the scene inside. There was momentary shock from those witnessing the spectacle, and they stared back at the beast in a strange silence. When the monster finally breathed in, bullets blasted into its face and chest as the guards were brought out of their stupor. It stopped, with its ribcage fully expanded, and released its scream. The girls were thrown to the ground from the sheer force of the sound. As it continued to bellow they crawled with all their might into the stairwell, where Anna closed the thick door behind her, struggling against the force of the sound. The three of them, with ears still ringing, finally managed to get to their feet, only to see the rotten corpse of the bride smiling on the landing of the stairway above.

* * *

Paul reloaded as Deacon fired a bullet into the head of another Fang that dared to venture past the body of the downed guard. Suddenly, they were thrown to the ground with the force of a scream erupting from behind. Even the Fangs that feasted before them fell to their bellies and struggled away from the noise. The two of them couldn't help but drop their weapons and cover their ears as the sounds boomed down the hall, noise reinforced by the blasts of rifles in the enclosed corridor.

"Get up, Deacon, come on!" said Paul, shaking him vigorously with his foot. Deacon looked up to see Paul's terrified face framed by the intricate wooden paneling that lined the ceiling. It was only then that Deacon realized he was lying on his back. Sounds rang in his ears and everything seemed to be moving in slow motion.

It was the sudden blast of Paul's rifle, directly above him, that brought Deacon back into the situation. He jumped up, shook his head, and together the two of them ran back to the lobby. Directly toward the source of the scream.

* * *

The clunking of the generator became worse as Bill and Scott finally reached the door to the main electrical room. The lights above them continued to dim, and now were a flickering brown. Bill struggled with the keys while Scott, completely out of breath, sucked in the exhaust and mist filled air around him.

"C'mon, Bill, they're going out!"

"I know, I know!"

After what seemed an eternity Bill's shaking hands finally found the right key and the dead bolt snapped opened with a thud. Bill thrust the door open in triumph. He ran into the room and

grabbed a huge jerry can of diesel waiting in the corner. A large piece of paper with the words: *Emergency Use Only!* was taped on the can in big black letters.

"Do you think this qualifies?" asked Scott, pointing to the sign.

Bill looked up at him dumbfounded for a moment, astounded anyone could even attempt a joke in a situation like this. He tore the cap off of the generator's suspended fuel tank, and fumbled to put the nozzle of the jerry can inside. Together they lifted the diesel up toward the small fuel opening.

But they were a fumbled set of keys too late.

The engine suddenly stopped with a heavy click, and in an instant there was only a thick black darkness around them. They could hear screams travel down into the basement corridors from the people who were now lost and dying above them in the darkness.

* * *

Wes's body completely froze as he stared at the hissing creature, slowly approaching. He could now sympathize with how Anna felt on the night they were attacked near Hinton. A night that seemed so long ago. He, like Anna, was too surprised and too scared to move. A sudden motion might make the creature pounce. He gazed into its cold grey eyes and felt mesmerized. The beast hissed and croaked again, in a way that almost sounded rhythmic. Lucky continued to bark and growl wildly at the creature, but the sounds seemed to shrink into the background.

"Wesley…" groaned the creature, its voice becoming clear and singular as it continued to slowly inch toward him. Its head and hands occasionally twitched and spasmed. "I'm going to steal your form and kill your friends."

"No…no, you're not."

"It's too late…just go too sleep, my tired little boy. Go to sleep. You're so tired. Rest."

Wes felt his eyes getting heavy and muscles relax. A distant thought echoed in the back of his

head: *So this is how Cory died.* Lucky's barks sank even deeper into the surroundings.

"That's right, Wesley. It's all been a bad dream…a very bad dream…sleep… you will wake at home, like nothing ever happened."

The being slowly walked toward Wes's spellbound body with its mouth opened wide, as all around them the lights of the hotel went out.

* * *

Deacon and Paul reached the lobby in time to see the first Giant Black fall to the ground, dead. Its face and chest were riddled with bullets, and the body poured out black blood that soaked into the carpet and spread like spilled ink. There was a cheer from the men who brought the beast down but the hope quickly died as more shapes emerged through the destroyed front door. Gunfire echoed from all around the hotel. Men stomped on Scorps that made their way inside through the open doorway. Creepers fell as bullets flew into their heads and chests. Even the robed Skulls, armed with strange knives in their hands, fell to the gunfire, but still the creatures came.

"There are too many, Deek, I saw them approach. There's no winning this fight. We've gotta get out of here," said Paul as they ran through the room. How many times did he have to be reminded not to stay in one place? Paul suspected that tonight, he would finally pay the price for not learning his own lesson.

"What about your ability?" asked Deacon.

"It won't do anything for us tonight," said Paul with certainty.

Another shape unexpectedly appeared in the main doorway. A huge black hoof stepped inside, crushing the dead body of a fallen Creeper. It was another Giant Black, this one significantly larger than the first. It brought its other leg inside, stepping right over the dead body of its fallen comrade. The monster inspected the massive dead form beneath it and then slowly looked around the room with

pure venom in its eyes. The men stared back in stunned silence.

Both Deacon and Paul's mouths dropped open when they saw the beast had only one full antler, the other broken halfway up. Already they could see fresh stubs of velvety black horn growing in the broken area. The beast had to duck its head, even more than the first, as it came forward, followed by other smaller creatures behind it. Deacon saw the creature look directly at the two them, its huge black eyes open wider and focus. It remembered them too. The evil in its eyes faded to black as all the lights around them suddenly died.

* * *

The three girls stood trapped, trying to decide between the worse of the two evils. They looked up at the bride with their backs against the stairwell door. Behind them they could feel the vibration of the monstrous creature's feet as it walked. Rifle blasts sounded throughout the lobby behind them as the bride calmly smiled down at them.

"You're not real!" yelled Anna at the corpse on the landing.

She gave a cold turn of her head, side to side, and stepped off the stairwell just as the lights dimmed down and went out. They could hear her tumbling down the stairs toward them in the darkness.

Chapter 32 – 733

Wesley David – Final Entry

Deacon and Liv are probably dead.

This is it. I suppose that its finally time I woke up anyway. Haven't I been saying that now for a while? That all of this is just a dream? Every nightmare has to come to an end sooner or later, right? Just like all bubbles have to burst. At least that's what I've hoped and wished for since I started this useless journal. That none of it was real. Then my parents and brother wouldn't be dead. Then my arm never would have been ripped up. Then I wouldn't have helped kill a young girl. Then I wouldn't have starved...and ran...and cried...and fought...and struggled....

Paul and Scott are still fighting, down to the last bit of strength they have left, although the attack has slowed down now. I've lost my strength to fight, hung over and exhausted as I am. I admire them. I admire the six friends I've made. Imperfect, all of them, myself definitely included, but I wouldn't have wanted them to be any other way. Anything other than real human beings.

Will there be a deus ex machina for us? Not likely. There are no eagles outside, waiting to fly us away. Jesus hasn't shown up – hell, neither has Isack, although I've tried a little bit of prayer. Scotty is not going to beam us up. I guess it's all a little too little, a little too late. Ryan, I'll be seeing you soon, old buddy. I miss you.

We started to think we were so important. That maybe there was some kind of meaning to all of this. Some kind of meaning to this life of ours. But once again survival of the fittest has been shoved down our throats. A final lesson learned. Maybe it was all the mist playing with our minds after all.

I hear fiddle music.

* * *

Scott felt diesel pouring down his chest as he and Bill struggled to fill the tank in the darkness.

Their closed eyes watered and their nostrils burned as together they blindly poured the fuel. He couldn't help but wonder why they would mount the opening so high. Scott gagged repeatedly from the fumes.

"C'mon Scott, we've got to keep the tank up, stay strong…stay focused. We're never gonna survive this in the dark," said Bill from somewhere in the shadows.

Scott could feel the diesel pouring across his squished fingertips. The skin on his fingers had broken in a few places, and as diesel splashed over his cuts fire shot into his brain. His other arm struggled to keep the heavy tank lifted high enough.

"I don't know how long I can hold it, Bill!" Scott gasped. He gagged again from the fumes, and this time an alcohol smelling fluid came up from his stomach and he vomited through his mouth and nose onto his already soaked chest. Somehow, Scott Armstrong still managed to keep the tank above him lifted, his arm shaking from the strain.

"Jesus Christ, Scott!" said Bill. "That smells worse than the diesel! Next time just puke in the tank, we could use the fuel!"

It took a moment for the comment to register, but soon both of them were laughing hysterically, still struggling to keep the tank lifted above them in the darkness.

* * *

Dogs always have a favourite, and Lucky loved Wesley David the most. Wes was always the one bringing her food and keeping her water full. He played the most with the young dog and was never abusive or neglectful. They'd happily stayed together since the first day they met on the stairway of 14 Foxboro Way. Since arriving at the hotel, Wes was the first to let the dog outside to go do her business, and was always the first to take the dog back from its many guard shifts. Lucky had met humans she didn't like in her short life. Animals had a natural sense of character and Lucky was

no different. It was this sense of character that brought Lucky so close to Wes. It was why the animal chose Wes as much as he'd chosen her. It was this mutual love that made it so hard for the animal to sink her teeth into Wes's ankle, but somehow, Lucky knew it had to be done.

* * *

Paul didn't think it was possible, but the scream emanating from the darkness of the lobby was even louder than the first, and far louder than what he remembered from their previous encounter. This time, there was rage. Everyone in the room, both man and beast, could do nothing more than quiver on the ground until the scream ended. The sound and vibration penetrated deep into their chests and tickled their skin. Around them the decorative vases, large chandeliers, and windows exploded glass everywhere throughout the lobby.

* * *

The thought of the rotting body wrapped around her again was too much for Liv. She'd had nightmares since that night on the seventh floor, nightmares she did not want to relive. At least in the lobby she could run, creatures or no creatures. At least they were alive. The memory of those old fingers grabbing her, the stringy hair in her face, the smell of rot, and the feel of the leathery skin on her arms returned as she listened to the body tumble down the stairs toward them.

Not again.

Liv flung the stairwell door open and burst back out into the darkness of the lobby. Jen and Anna screamed at her to come back, but they dared not follow, fearing the source of the scream far more.

"We've got to get her!" said Anna, pressed against the door.

"Let her go," Jen replied.

Suddenly the girls felt bony arms pull them to the ground.

* * *

Scott and Bill filled the tank with more than three quarters of the diesel before their strength finally gave out. The tank slipped to the ground, spilling out gallons of fuel over both them and the floor.

"We've got to find the switch!" said Bill from somewhere in the darkness. "It's a green pushbutton." He frantically rustled and knocked unseen things over as he struggled in his search.

"It's green, huh? *That's great*," said Scott into the darkness around them. He ran his hands over the generator and pulled his hand back with a jerk. He'd burned his fingertips on something incredibly hot.

"Shit! I just burned myself. Where is this button supposed to be?"

"Right…here!" exclaimed Bill. There was a sudden whirl and the sound of an engine struggling to start. It coughed and wheezed like an old man, and sputtered out.

"I didn't drink a gallon of diesel for you not to start, you dirty whore!" yelled Scott at the generator. "Try again, Bill!"

There was another whirl and sputter of the engine struggling to start. Scott turned around in the darkness and kicked the large piece of machinery with all his might. There was a clang and a cough, and the engine started.

All over the hotel, hope returned as lights steadily came back to life, one by one.

They left the spilt diesel and searing hot generator behind them without a thought as they sprinted together back toward the struggle in the lobby.

* * *

"*Aargh*!" yelled Wes as a pain jolted up his leg. He couldn't help but shake Lucky from his ankle, violently flinging her against a nearby wall. At the very same time the lights came back on, and combined with the pain in his leg, sense returned to his head. The twisted form of the Grey Man was now almost on top of him, its jaw opened toward his neck. Wes instantly jumped back from the assault and fired his rifle from reflex. The bullet blasted into the grey creature's chest, and cherry red blood erupted from a gaping wound. The creature staggered back, tripped over a television table, and awkwardly fell onto the ground. Its legs and hands twitched and kicked for a few terrifying moments before stopping.

Wes looked down at the small animal cowering in the corner. "Good girl, Lucky… good girl!"

Lucky marched out of the corner with her tail wagging and barked in triumph.

* * *

There was elation with the return of lights and a cheer erupted around the hotel. The lobby was still poorly lit as the light bulbs in the room were shattered by the scream, but the scant illumination from outside revealed the battle around them. Gunfire erupted with the return of the lights.

Paul and Deacon struggled to their feet and bolted for the stairwell door. Some of the other men who fought were making the same attempt as the fighting continued.

"Oh, my God, it's Liv!" said Paul as he watched her thin body staggering down the corridor. People and creatures took little notice of her as she went by. They couldn't hear her crying from that distance, but Deacon's heart still exploded in his chest.

"I'll get her, meet me at the truck if you can," said Deacon.

"No, let me, you get upstairs and get Jen," answered Paul who chased her.

"No!" said Deacon who grabbed his shoulder. "Let me, Paul…let me."

Paul looked into Deacon's eyes and understood.

"Okay. But wait for us!" said Paul.

"I will for as long as I can," said Deacon, who ran a few steps and then without warning turned back to look at Paul as he was about to open the stairwell door. "Paul!" he called. His friend turned around. "Paul—don't fear the passage." Deacon gave a tremulous smile, holding his gaze for as long as he dared, then turned around and sprinted down the corridor after Liv.

Paul felt an enormous grief settle over him, joining the fear and desperation in his heart as he watched Deacon sprinting alone down the hallway. Something told Paul he might never see him again.

* * *

"What the hell are you guys doing?" asked Scott as he reached the top of the stairs. Beneath him Anna and Jen fought, struggled and screamed with the air on the floor of the landing.

"There's nothing there!" Scott bellowed at them with all his might.

Bill, who followed behind Scott, ran by with rifle in hand. "Thanks, Scott. Good luck."

"Yeah, you too, Bill."

Just as Bill was about to open the door to the lobby it swung open on its own to reveal Paul. They both lifted their rifles but stopped when they recognized each other. Bill ran by without a word.

"What the hell are they doing?" asked Paul as he stepped inside. The girls continued to struggle fiercely with the air.

"I don't know, I think they're hallucinating. We, I mean *they*, drank a lot tonight," said Scott.

"Jesus, look at you! You're covered in puke!" said Paul. "Bah! Grab one of 'em and let's get upstairs."

* * *

It didn't take long for Deacon to catch her. Liv stumbled as she ran, with eyes full of tears and a head full of booze. Deacon grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. She screamed and flailed against him until she realized he was neither the bride, nor a creature. In the middle of the chaos, with gunfire exploding around them, and creatures and people running to and fro, she wrapped her arms around him and cried into his shoulder. Deacon could smell the alcohol on her breath.

"I knew you'd come, Deek," said Liv.

They stood there for an impossibly long time, alone together, as the mist swirled about them.

* * *

By the time Paul and Scott got the girls to the top of the stairs they'd come to their senses, but what they saw next made them all question themselves. A short bellhop stood there holding the door open for them. He had the same strange glow as the bride and wore a wry smile on his face. He waved his gloved hand toward the opening of the door he held for them. Together, the four of them ran through the doorway to the second floor as fast as they could. Anna turned around after they'd passed but he was already gone.

Out of another open doorway walked a short Creeper. It only had enough time to look up at them with what seemed like an expression of surprise before Paul put a bullet through its neck. As they stepped over its dead body, its black hand weakly grabbed onto Anna's pant leg and she screamed. Scott slammed the butt of his rifle into the creature's face and its grip faltered.

Another shape emerged out of a room in front of them, and Paul almost squeezed the trigger of the rifle again before he realized it was Wes.

"Wes, guard the hall while we grab our stuff!" said Paul who jumped into his room. Scott and

the girls did the same. It took little time for them to come back out, as they did not have to be encouraged to hurry. Jen emerged with her backpack and tears in her eyes.

"Where's Deacon?" she asked with tears in her eyes. "His stuff is already gone."

Paul was about to answer when something caught his tongue. His mind suddenly went back to Deacon's confession in the Rocky Mountain Goods store, and he decided not to reveal to Jen he had gone after Liv.

"He's got the truck keys. We'll meet him soon, downstairs in the loading bay," said Paul.

"Where's Liv?" asked Scott who quickly pulled on a clean shirt.

"She's…downstairs too."

* * *

Deacon and Liv ran, hand in hand, down the corridor toward the loading bay. In his other hand Deacon carried his pistol. There were no bullets left, having spent all of them buying the girls time to escape. He considered dropping the weapon, but even empty, the gun brought him some sense of protection, even if he could only use it to pistol whip something over the head. Deacon looked up to see Scorps crawling on the ceiling. Not many, but they got thicker and thicker as they ran toward the loading dock. Around him, Deacon realized the sound of gunfire was dying out. Either the ammo was running low, or the people left to shoot it.

"How are we getting out of here?" asked Liv.

"We're going to the loading dock, to the truck," answered Deacon who suddenly pulled her to the side to avoid a dropping Scorp. He slammed his boot down on the creature, breaking its thick shell, and a smelly yellow paste oozed out. He cringed at the sight of it.

Deacon thrust the door open in triumph when they finally reached the loading dock. He was surprised to see the lights on, but even more surprised to see Grimmon pointing a rifle at his head. His chest and face were covered in blood. A large key box lay dumped on the floor and a large pile of keys

were spread out in front of him.

"Where is the key, boy? I know your friend had it last night! What've you done with it?"

Deacon's mind searched for an answer as the two of them stood pointing their weapons at each other.

* * *

Paul led the five of them back toward the stairwell. They were well armed, but Paul didn't think they could fight all the way to the loading dock now. The situation only deteriorated when the stairwell door ahead of them flung open to reveal a young man being chased by a pack of Fangs.

"Back! Back! Run!" screamed Paul, and run they did, full sprint back down the corridor toward the opposite stairwell, taking them even farther away from the loading dock on the far side of the hotel. Around them the voice of the mist returned.

"No escape!"

Suddenly in front of them another suite door opened, and a Creeper walked out. In its hands was a severed human arm. It turned and gaped at them with as much surprise as its evil face could show. It was too close for Paul to lift his rifle to aim, so instead he swung the weapon like a baseball bat into the creature's face. It fell to the ground with thud.

"Help me…please!" came a girl's voice from inside the room. Paul stopped. The girl, who Paul recognized as Cindy, looked at him with her head hanging limply from the side of the bed. Her missing arm was hidden by her body. A casual observer wouldn't even know she was dying except for the red slowly spreading over the white sheets beneath her.

"Forget her, Paul!" yelled Scott. "Go! Go!"

The incident slowed them down enough to allow the young man and his pursuers to almost catch up. Paul pulled himself away from her, as she wailed at him not leave, and they carried on down

the corridor. *It's too late to save my soul anyway,* thought Paul.

* * *

"I've got it. I've got it," said Deacon pulling the key out from his jean pocket. The empty pistol in his other hand shook with fear.

"Give it to me now!" said Grimmon sounding almost rabid. Spittle flew from his mouth.

"You have to bring us with you," Deacon said. "And we have to give my friends some time."

"You're in no position to make demands, boy! You were going to steal it! You were going to leave us all behind here…you knew! Somehow you knew! I should shoot you right now." They could see Grimmon's grip tighten on his rifle.

"And if you'd found the key?" asked Liv. "Where would *you* be right now, *our fearless leader*? Long gone, no doubt, leaving the rest of us in the dust."

"I've done all I could here! Do you hear me! All that I could! I've sacrificed my son for this godforsaken place, so don't you dare accuse me of running, you little whore."

Deacon realized it was probably a good thing his pistol was empty because he would have put a bullet through Grimmon's head at that moment. Fury and adrenaline coursed through him, but even vibrating with fury, Deacon realized he was in no position to deal with the man. If this spiraled out of control, he would be the dead one.

"Okay. Okay, calm down. There's enough death out there as it is. You'll need help out in the mist, Grimmon. Bring us with you. At least for a while," said Deacon.

Grimmon grunted and nodded acceptance. Surprisingly, he was the one to bring down his weapon first. He must have come to the same conclusion.

"Fine. But *you* drive," said Grimmon. "And we leave now." He ran to the loading bay door and pulled the chain down hard. As the large door opened even more wet mist poured into the bay.

Liv turned to Deacon with tears streaming down her cheeks and whispered, "But how can we leave them behind, Deacon? How can we abandon them?"

"We're not abandoning them, Liv….In a way, they're abandoning us."

* * *

Paul stopped and kicked the stairwell door hard. He was wondering how they were going to get back across the entire hotel wing, and how they could possibly get through the lobby. Had Deacon already left without them?

Paul's breath caught as stepped out onto the stairwell landing. On the floor below, a sea of Scorps writhed and flipped over one another like a huge pile of black cockroaches. Even as Paul watched they crept farther and farther up the stairs. In the distance another scream erupted from a Giant Black, shaking the entire hotel around them.

Scott bumped into Paul from behind and had to quickly grab onto him to stop from knocking him down the stairs into the pool of horror below. With a look of terror Scott took in the scene below them. Trapped. Scott dropped his head and sighed, "*Unfuckingbelievable.*"

Paul reached into his pocket and pulled out the key to room 733.

"I guess we're going up, Scotty. It's time to find out what's in that room," said Paul.

"Well, yeah! What the hell else are we gonna do?"

* * *

Deacon quickly jumped into the truck behind Liv and placed the key in the ignition. Something inside kept telling him the truck wouldn't start. It would be so wonderfully ironic for it not to, making all his effort for the key and his escape a complete waste. It would make deserting his companions,

and friendships, and lover all for nothing. That's what would happen in a movie, or at the very least, it wouldn't start until the last moment. With just enough time to have the killer's hook get stuck in the window.

Deacon turned the key, and to his complete surprise, the truck instantly fired up.

* * *

Paul led them up the stairs. Anna made it in time to keep the Scorps from biting her feet but the young man who followed closely behind her was not so lucky. He burst through the still open door and turned all of his weight down the stairs without looking. He was too late, and by the time he saw the scene below and tried to stop, he slipped and tumbled down into the seething pile. He was devoured. Luckily, the first two Fangs following behind made the very same mistake, and came to the very same end. They screamed along with the young man as flesh was torn from the bone. The Fang that managed to stop in time could only growl and grunt at them while backing down the corridor from which it came. The stairwell landing became an unsurpassable barrier.

Paul led them up the stairs at full speed. They ran against a waterfall of mist pouring down the stairs like milk. It made it difficult to find a proper footfall, and they slipped repeatedly as they struggled their way up. Jen was bawling over Deacon, but she continued to run hard. When they reached the seventh floor their hearts pumped blood and their lungs struggled for air in a way they hadn't for some time. Even Lucky seemed spent.

"C'mon, Anna, hurry!" yelled Paul. He was the first one to the top and couldn't help but look to the landing above them expecting to see the bride. Or the devil. But it was empty and strangely quiet.

The seventh floor corridor, this time fully lit, revealed the intricate wallpaper and doorways that led to the suites. The lighting also fully revealed the dark shapes that stood waiting for them at the

end of the hall.

* * *

The headlights of the truck beamed out into the fog as Grimmon leapt into the back and knocked his rifle on the roof, signaling to Deacon he was ready. Deacon put the truck into drive and they pulled out into the mist.

"Wait!" yelled a voice as the door into the loading bay opened. Bill ran through, hand in hand, with a woman. It was Peggy, his pregnant wife. Together they bounded down the metal stairs as fast as they could, but she was slowing them down. Her arms were locked tightly around her stomach and she wore an expression of agony.

Before the door could close a large black hand stopped it. Deacon could see its fingers in the rear view mirror. A Creeper stepped boldly out onto the loading platform and snarled. It was bigger than any Deacon had ever seen.

"Jesus Christ! Shoot it, Grimmon!" yelled Liv from the front seat. Grimmon aimed his rifle, yet did nothing.

"Shoot it!" roared Deacon in agreement. Grimmon's rifle shook in his hands, but still he did nothing.

The creature bounded off the elevated concrete loading dock directly at Peggy. It didn't make it far, however, as Bill courageously jumped in front. The two of them hit the ground together with a smack and Deacon turned his head too slowly to avoid seeing the creature's teeth tear into Bill's neck. Grimmon swiftly leaned over the side and grabbed Peggy Shaw, who was frozen in horror, and lifted her out of the struggle and into the truck.

Deacon jammed it into drive and they flew out into the cold night.

* * *

"Impossible! They're standing right in front of it!" said Scott.

"They know. 733. Somehow they know, but how?" asked Wes.

"It doesn't matter because that's *our* room, boys," said Paul, who stepped ahead of them in the mist and readied his rifle. They could hear the anger and resilience in his voice. There was not so much as a hint of fear, and it inspired all of them.

Scott, Wes, and Paul ran toward the creatures with rage overflowing in their hearts. Lucky joined them, barely visible above the mist that collected on the floor, barking and snarling. The black forms turned to see the oncoming assault, and surprisingly stepped back from the charge. Paul was the first to shoot, stopping momentarily to put a bullet through the head of the first creature. The three others standing with it stepped back even further after witnessing their comrade fall. Wes was the next to fire, hitting the next shape in its bony shoulder. It hissed and fell to the floor, disappearing beneath the layer of mist floating above the carpet. Blood exploded across a nearby light fixture, spreading a strange purple light over the area. The two remaining Creepers ran for the exit at the end of the corridor.

The five of them came to the door and stood before it in silence. The numbers 733 seemed somehow bigger than the ones on the other doors.

"Okay, get prepared for *anything.* If Elvis is in there doing a jig in a tutu I want you to be ready," said Paul as he put the key in the hole and turned the lock.

The door swung open before them and Paul excitedly hit the switch to reveal an average, everyday hotel room.

* * *

There was a moment of silence as they headed down the skinny asphalt road winding around

the back of the complex. There was a smoke in the air along with the thick mist that surrounded the hotel. Occasionally they would come across a light pole that gave them some sense of their surroundings but without them Deacon could only rely on the small yellow lines along the road in front of them.

"Jesus, why didn't you shoot it?" Liv demaned, turning to face Grimmon in the back. He had no difficulty hearing because of the missing window.

Grimmon, whose face could barely be made out in the darkness, didn't reply. All they could hear were the moans and blabbering of Peggy Shaw, who sat alone across from him in the far corner.

"How come you didn't shoot it! Were you afraid to waste a bullet, you goddamn coward?" continued Liv, furious. She sounded like she was going to explode. Deacon didn't know if it was the alcohol in her, or if she'd snapped after the night's events. Spittle flew from her mouth much like it had from Grimmon's earlier.

This time he responded.

"BECAUSE IT'S EMPTY!" yelled Grimmon, who'd heard enough. "It was empty from the beginning."

* * *

They searched the room for what seemed like an eternity. Under the bed, in the drawers, behind the TV, beneath the mattress, behind the curtains and behind the pictures, but found nothing. They then smashed the TV open and looked inside, shattered the picture frames, flipped the mattresses, and broke the bathroom mirror and still they found nothing.

"What the fuck!" cursed Paul, kicking over the already smashed TV. "Maybe the mist is tricking us. Maybe this isn't the right room!" Paul ran to the front door and opened it. Three large gold letters still sat on it. 733. He closed his eyes and ran his fingers along the numbers. 733.

Paul opened his eyes in time to see the Creeper jump at him. He ducked and fell back allowing Scott to fire a shot into its chest. Paul and Wes barely managed to get the thing's body out of the doorway in time to close and lock the door before others arrived. They pounded away on it.

The five of them stepped back from the door. Suddenly another knocking came, this time from the adjoining door leading to suite 734. They were surrounded.

* * *

Deacon stopped before the large parking lot spread out before them and smartly turned the truck lights off. Large poles went off into the distance disappearing into specks of light shrouded by mist. Across the parking lot they could make out thousands of creatures, of all kinds and all types, some that Deacon and Liv could not recognize or even begin to describe. Many fought with one another, yet they all were slowly making their way toward the hotel.

"I thought we could handle anything," said Grimmon quietly.

"No one could handle this," said Deacon.

"There's no escape, is there?" asked Liv who looked out onto the spectacle before her. "We're gonna die tonight."

"Probably," answered Grimmon. "But I still have an idea."

* * *

They fought with everything they had. The words *Custard's last stand* kept repeating over and over in Paul's head as he shot, hacked, and hewed the arms and faces that struggled to get inside the room. They began to even come through the walls, where there were no more mattresses or furniture to block the holes. Two Creepers had made their way right into the room and their bodies lay dead on

the floor. To make matters worse, the lights had again started to dim and Paul was sure he could smell smoke. He knew it would end quickly if the darkness again set in on them.

"C'mon, Wes! This is no time to write poetry! Quit writing in that damn journal and help us out!" yelled Paul who hacked another finger off a hand that made its way through a large hole in the door leading to room 734.

"Why, Paul? The story's over. I just have to add the last entry. Readers hate to be left in a lurch," said Wes.

Paul swore to himself and returned to holding a large cabinet against the door.

"How does it end, Wes?" asked Jen who also had not been any help in the situation. She had only just stopped crying over Deacon, and seemed lost and withdrawn.

"A blaze of glory?" huffed Scott who'd taken out his knife and was furiously slashing at another creature that made its way past a mattress.

Suddenly, all around them the lights went out.

"No," answered Wes from somewhere in the darkness. "It ends in shadow and despair."

* * *

Deacon drove the truck down an embankment so steep he was sure that they were going to flip. Somehow, impossibly, they didn't, and got away with only busting one headlight on a boulder. The truck lurched forward, nearly getting itself lodged on the rocks and finally leveled out in a large patch of potatoes in the huge garden that was once Banff's finest golf course. Deacon drove right through patches of corn, peas, and carrots under Grimmon's direction. Grimmon was able to get them through the mist from his knowledge of the garden stretching through almost eighteen holes. On the thirteenth hole the mist ended, revealing a perfect wall lit by moonlight lifting endlessly into the sky. Deacon looked up at the stars in the clear night above him and wondered if Paul would ever see his satellites

again.

Deacon drove the four of them onto an empty mountain service road heading back into the town of Banff. Peggy Shaw still wailed in the back.

"It's burning," said Grimmon quietly from the back. "It's all burning."

From a distance the mist was turning more and more orange as they drove along the road. They were far enough away now they could distinguish the entire shroud around the hotel. It was a huge glowing pillar stretching its way right up into the sparse cloud cover above them. It reached infinitely into the sky.

"Did they get out, Deek?" asked Liv quietly.

Deacon took her hand and squeezed it. Her face was sad, yet beautiful, lit by the strange orange glow emanating from behind them.

"They got out, Liv. They got out. They…went. I know it."

"And what about us?" asked Liv.

"I'm taking you to Utah," answered Deacon, who tried to smile into her teary eyes. "If you'll come with me, that is. Sara told me to find the man behind the curtain, and I'm going to. Or die trying."

* * *

"Now the building's on fire," said Scott half laughing. "Isn't that just wonderful! Like I always used to tell Ryan: *You can't fuck with Mr. Murphy and his law."*

Scott laughed alone. With the increasing smoke and heat from the fire below, and the sudden darkness surrounding them, the attack on the room came to a stop. They could hear creatures of all kinds struggling outside, desperately trying to escape the burning hotel. They had little interest in them, or the room, anymore. The five and a half of them sat there together on the floor, back to back,

struggling to breathe in the thickening smoke. Waiting for the death they had eluded for so long.

"It was good knowing you guys. I'm…Oh, fuck. I'm sorry it had to end this way," said Paul.

"Yeah, it was good knowing you too," said Scott. The rest of them were too terrified or distraught to answer.

"Deacon!" moaned Jen into the silence. She received no response.

* * *

Shadow and smoke had almost taken them away, when out of the darkness came the muffled and distant sound of a fiddle. Lucky slowly got up from lying beside Wes and growled.

"Do you hear that?" croaked Wes, breaking into a coughing fit.

"Yeah…it's coming from the room beside us!" said Paul, with excitement growing in his voice as he spoke.

"734?" asked Anna.

"No, it's coming from the other side," said Wes.

"We're in the wrong room!" muttered Scott.

"No. No, we're not. There is no room there, it's just the stairwell," said Paul.

"Check the wall!" said Wes.

The orange and yellow of the flames engulfing the hotel gave off an eerie glow that provided them with enough light to see in the room, even with the thick mist entombing them. They got up and walked toward the sound, with only Jen continuing to wallow in grief. Under closer inspection, they could see a square of glowing blue light coming right through the wall paper. Paul stuck out his finger and poked it. It tore open easily enough, flooding the small room with a strange blue that mixed with the orange and yellow firelight to make a sickening green on their faces.

The music of the fiddle resounded as Paul tore open a gapping hole in the wallpaper with joy.

The rest of them joined him like kids opening a birthday present. They ripped and tore at the paper until a bright blue light covered their faces. Before them a large doorway opened into a hidden room. The song coming from inside was again "The Devil Went Down to Georgia", now loud and clear. Everyone stared at the opening in the wall. Even Jen got up to see.

"Paul, by all means," said Scott waving his hand toward the doorway, much as the bellhop had done earlier.

Paul bravely stepped through. He pulled off a small note that hung in his line of sight tied to a string.

It took me two weeks to cut through and repair this wall. I can only hope you made it this far.

-Richard Empire.

Paul read the note with a smile and handed it back to the others, then stepped fully inside.

What Paul saw that warm fall night looked like a large rectangular silver mirror with rounded corners, frameless, and floating completely unsuspended in the middle of the room. The others followed him inside and they all stood in silence. Staring.

At a doorway.

Already they could feel the heat from the fire overcoming the hotel. It was only a matter of time until the entire structure collapsed.

"Thère it is again," said Wes, pointing behind them. "Written right across the wall."

They all turned around and slowly read the words scrawled in faded paint:

Do not fear the passageway to the world beyond, one man went in, and returned.

- Tommy McCauley. April 11, 1888.

They stood together in silence taking in the words and their meaning.

"Well then," said Scott with a sigh. "Who goes first?"

On the other side of the circle, the fiddle continued to play,

* * *

When there were no more of the humans left to kill, the beast tilted back its head and let go another scream as black blood dripped from its face and chest.

It would have left if it could. The tears and holes in its flesh were gravely serious, it despised the fire and smoke, and if it did not rest and eat soon, it knew it would not survive. But the voice would not allow it to leave.

It wasn't just the words of the voice that spurred the beast forward, it was also a compulsion. A force. The very same that made it come to this strange building. The very same that brought it to this strange world. And now the voice screamed and commanded the beast, more desperate and angry than it had ever been before.

"Up! Kill! Up! Stop them! Up!"

The beast screamed again, this time at the force controlling it as it strode helplessly toward the stairway.

* * *

"Well, girl," said Wes to Lucky as he prepared to throw her into the portal, "I sure hope they have biscuits in Oz."

Their mouths dropped as they watched the lanky dog disappear entirely into the mirror. Paul walked behind the portal to see with his own eyes that the pup hadn't fallen on the floor behind. His face wore the same expression as the men who first saw the spectacle over a century before.

Jen refused to even acknowledge the doorway; instead she sat on the floor inside the strange room, on her knees praying. Paul looked at her worriedly and spoke. "Okay, Scott, you're up."

"What? Why do I have to go first?"

"For Christ's sake, Scott, the building's on fire! We've got to get out!" yelled Paul. "We'll be right behind you!"

Scott and Paul argued as the building burned.

* * *

The heat against the beast's scaled body was so hot its skin buckled and peeled as it walked. At its cloven feet the large insects squirmed and flipped, and those that survived the heat and flame bit chunks of rigid flesh from the beast's feet and legs. But still it walked toward the stairwell.

The building, as massive as it was, was still too small for the beast, and it tried unsuccessfully to duck through the large double doors leading to the main stairwell. There was no way its proud horns could fit through, even with one of the huge antlers broken in half. The beast, satisfied it could not do the voice's bidding, turned toward the front door. Toward escape.

But that was not allowed.

The beast let out another scream, standing in the searing heat, billowing smoke, and writhing insects, only this time it was a scream of terror. Terror that it no longer controlled its own arm. The arm reached up and wrapped its wiry fingers around the giant unbroken antler, and violently tore it right out of the socket with an unnatural strength. The sound that came from the beast as the antler was ripped away was death, agony, and horror. It was at that moment that the black heart of the beast stopped and its consciousness and movements were replaced by something far more sinister.

The animated arm of the beast tossed the huge and bloody rack across the floor, and with one antler broken, and the other only a bleeding hole, it successfully ducked through the doorway and

made its way up the stairs of the burning structure.

* * *

"But why me? I mean, it was only a dog…what if humans don't….C'mon! There's no way I'm goin' first!"

Scott was suddenly interrupted by the horrified moan of a Giant Black in the distance. Except it was not like the screams that blasted through the hotel over the course of the attack. It was a breathless screech of pure torture and anguish. A sound, not of power, but of terror and frustration that curdled their blood. None of them could even begin to imagine what could make the creature emit a noise like that.

"Okay then, see ya," said Scott who instantly jumped forward. They all watched his feet disappear into the mirror.

* * *

"Anna, you're up!" said Paul.

She walked over took Paul's hand. "The world across this doorway…it's far worse than you think."

"It can't be worse than this."

Anna looked into his eyes and nodded. She put her arms around Paul and gave him an awkward hug and slowly stepped back.

"I never thanked you for saving me, and for your friend's sacrifice," she said, so quietly only Paul could hear her voice over the flames and crackling on the floors below them.

Paul smiled at her. "You'll get your chance to repay me."

Anna gave a sly smile in return as she ducked and stepped fully into the mirror.

She's definitely getting better, thought Paul.

* * *

Halfway up the stairs to the seventh floor the beast ran out of blood to bleed on to the intricate carpeting but still it continued to step forward. At the base of its legs, the flesh and tendons had been almost entirely eaten or burned away, but still a compulsion urged the weight of the beast up the stairs.

Its burnt flesh fell and disappeared into the mist on the floor as it left the flames and insects behind. It walked like a gargantuan puppet on strings as it made its way toward the seventh floor.

* * *

"Okay, Jen—your turn!" yelled Paul. The heat brought a sweat to his face and thirst burned in his mouth and veins. He could only imagine how Wes felt, who was beginning to sober up from drinking the night away.

Jen, still on her knees with her hands together in front of her, did not even turn her head toward Paul as she spoke. "I'm not going."

Paul and Wes looked at each other. Wes was the first to speak.

"What! Are you going to burn to death instead? Or get ripped apart? Didn't you hear that scream? It's coming for us!"

"I'm going to get out. But not *that* way."

There was a sudden smash of a doorway blowing open in the distance. They could hear heavy footsteps approaching at the far end of the corridor, steps so slow and powerful the vibration resonated over the fire and chaos below. They could also hear what sounded like claws scraping against the

walls. Beneath them, they could feel the entire hotel lurch. Total collapse was not far off.

"It's coming!" yelled Wes. "C'mon, Jen, smarten up!"

Jen turned to Wes with flames dancing in her eyes. "Go, Wes. Go see what's out there, you, out of all of us, deserve to finally find out."

Wes didn't move until Paul whispered in his ear, "I'll take care of this."

Wes looked at Paul and nodded. If anyone could get her through, it would be Paul, one way or another.

The mirror portal called to Wes in some inexplicable way. It was beautiful as it shimmered with a pale blue light. Even if there had been another escape, this was the way out Wes would have taken. He felt a sense of relief as he confidently stepped across the threshold.

Jen remained with her knees frozen to the ground.

* * *

What remained of the door to room 733 blew across the suite as the horrific beast tried to get inside. Large marks of charred flesh and blood stained the walls and doors the beast touched. The bullets had taken off more than one finger.

Even with a horn missing, the beast could not fit through the single doorway, and the animated form violently tore at the doorframe and walls to create an opening for itself.

* * *

"Jen, c'mon, now is not a time to give up!" yelled Paul. "We've been through too much for this!"

"I'm not leaving my family, I'm not leaving my God, and I'm not leaving Deacon."

A voice inside of Paul screamed at him to tell her the truth, even though it wrenched his heart to say it. Worse than the day he found his mother sitting speechless with the note from his father in her hands. Worse than leaving Ryan behind in that cabin and seeing blood spray across the window as he and Scott dragged Deacon, screaming and thrashing away from the hopeless scene.

"Jen," said Paul as calmly as he could with the sounds of the walls smashing open in the room beside them. "He went after Liv."

Jen turned her tear-stained face toward him.

"I know, Paul," she said quietly, "I know."

* * *

More flesh tore from the bone as the beast squeezed itself through the doorway, across broken wood, steel, and nails. As it stepped fully into the room a sense of anticipation came to the puppeteer.

* * *

"Than come with us!" begged Paul, with tears now falling down his own cheeks. "There's no time! Come with me, Jen, I can't leave you behind."

"Yes, you can, and yes, you will," said Jen who closed her eyes and returned to prayer. "It's your nature, Paul. Take that instinct and protect them with it."

* * *

The beast bent down and looked through the opening at the two humans that had not yet escaped its grasp. They were trapped. No deafening wail would even be necessary.

* * *

"Please, Jen, please!" begged Paul.

"All that I have that matters is gone forever. There is nothing left for me now. Go, Paul. Go. I have my own world beyond to explore," said Jen. Hysterical, in a totally calm way.

Had she opened her eyes at that moment, she would have seen the shredded and raw face of the animated beast before her, looking in at them through Richard Empire's paper doorway.

A part of him wanted to stay, to protect her, to help her in any way he could, but the same instinct that made him pull Jessica Grainger to the ground, that made him drag Deacon away from Anna's cabin, made his legs step back, turn, and hurl his body headfirst into the portal.

* * *

He promised to protect his mother.

He promised not to stay in one place.

He promised they would never give up.

He promised he would never leave anyone behind again.

As Paul Dean's world went to black, one final thought escaped.

No more promises.

* * *

End Book 1